

# AUTHENTIC

SCIENCE

FICTION

MONTHLY

29

1/6

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Novel by:

W. F.  
TEMPLE

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CLARKE

and

F. J.  
ACKERMAN

Also:  
Readers' Letters

Science  
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throughout



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Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931.



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A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

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A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at great profit and have prospered ever since."

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EDITOR : H. J. CAMPBELL, F.C.S., F.R.H.S., M.S.C.I., F.B.I.S.

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## EDITORIAL

# stay with us

Herewith the first issue of the *new Authentic*. I hope you like it. We think that it is the best thing that has happened yet in British science fiction. A glance at the contents page will show you that in addition to our usual features there is a complete novel by William F. Temple, a short story by Ray Bradbury, and a welcome Guest Article from Arthur C. Clarke.

William F. Temple is one of the foremost British science-fiction writers, and author of the well-known novel *The Four-sided Triangle*, which has been published in four languages (including American!) and has been filmed in this country with Barbara Payton as the star. Bill, as he is known by fans here and in America, has been writing science fiction for a good long while. He is a member of the British Interplanetary Society and



was one of the first editors of that Society's *Journal*. His stories have been included in *The Best Science Fiction Stories* for four years running.

Ray Bradbury is considered to be the top-flight American science-fiction author. In America he has appeared in some forty short-story

anthologies and has had three books published, all of which have been put out by British publishers. He feels equally at home writing weird, science fiction, or straight fantasy tales, and has had several radio plays broadcast in the States.

To my knowledge this is the first time a Ray Bradbury story has appeared in a British science-fiction magazine.

Arthur C. Clarke needs no introduction, but a few notes about him appear with his Guest Article on page 30.

As you can see, *Authentic* will be very different in the future. Very different—but vastly improved. The publishers' aim is to play an even greater part than before in raising the standard of British science-fiction publications. Those of you who built up an affection for our former authors can find them in our Panther Book series, keeping up their standard and turning out the good, solid stories that made *Authentic* the biggest-circulating British science-fiction magazine.

But in the pages of *Authentic* you will now find appearing stories by world-famous science-fiction writers. Authors whose works have been translated into many languages, and who, by reason of their craftsmanship, have achieved a vast following.

This new improved *Authentic* is the result of careful research into the thousands of readers' letters which we have received, and each one of you readers who has written

to us in the past can feel that he has had a hand in steering *Authentic* towards its goal of being the premier British science fiction magazine.

Yes—your letters have done it, and we want them to continue to pour in. To show you how much I value your criticisms and suggestions I am giving away a prize each month of a library of six non-fiction technical books to the author of the letter which contains the most helpful and constructive criticism. So keep those letters rolling—*Authentic* thrives on them. The final decision, of course, will be mine, and no correspondence can be entered into regarding it. The winning letter will be starred each month on the Projectiles page.

Mention of fandom brings me to a topic that is at once pleasant and distressing, a delight and a danger—the National Science Fiction Convention. Let me give you the good news first.

The Convention in 1953 will be held on Saturday and Sunday, 23rd and 24th May (Whitsun) at the Bonnington Hotel, Southampton Row, London, W.C.1. As usual, there is a registration fee of 2/6 to be paid immediately to the Convention Treasurer, c/o "The White Horse," Fetter Lane, London, E.C.4. This guarantees you a place and entitles you to news bulletins giving information on what will happen there. Admission to the Convention itself will cost 12/6 for two days, 7/6 for one day, *less* the registration fee, if it has been paid. This year, for the first time, ladies and teenagers will be admitted at half price, but their registration fee of 2/6 should be paid in advance.

It is hoped that this year will see the best Convention ever—and the largest. A great deal depends on how many people respond with registration fees, because these guarantee the Committee a certain sum for expenditure. So, if *you* want to come, send your fee right away to the Treasurer. All other communications should be addressed to the Convention Secretary at the "White Horse Tavern."

Now for the unpleasantness. A number of provincial fans have expressed disapproval of London Conventions, feeling that *they* should be allowed to put on a show



in their own towns. By "allow" they presumably mean that London should not hold one as a counter-attraction.

It is not my place, as editor of this magazine, to enter this controversy. But this I will say—*Authentic* will support anybody's convention anywhere. Here we are concerned with spreading good science fiction; we hold no special brief for London, Manchester or Madras, Leeds or Lhasa—it's all the same to *Authentic*. So, however the controversy resolves itself, just let us know well in advance where a convention is to be held and we will do all we can to help out. You can count on *Authentic*.

H.J.C.

# WILLIAM F. TEMPLE'S *Immortal's Playthings*

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*Venus — and a world  
run wild*

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*Illustrated by RICHARDS*

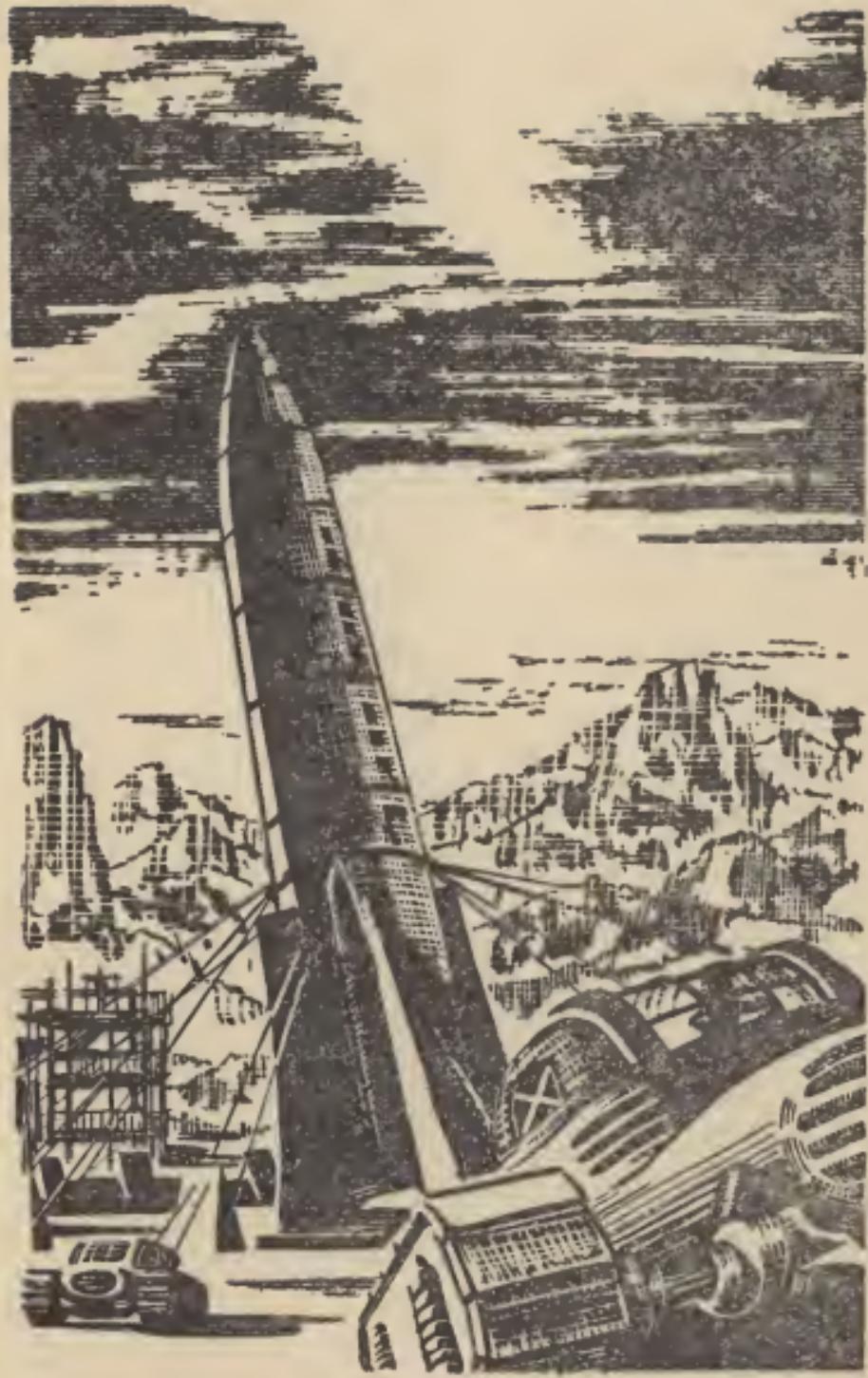
## CHAPTER ONE

**I**NSIDE the space-ship the light was becoming unbearably bright. Each of the crew felt that he was standing at the focus point of a score of naked arc lights. Meter dials shone like mirrors and defied reading. Hand-rails blazed like rods of white fire, and fingers hesitated to grip them. But it was all light, nothing more. The temperature hadn't risen by one degree, even though they were all twenty-six million miles nearer the sun than their native Earth. The heating of the ship was controlled by a thermocouple.

Captain J. Freiburg shielded the chronometer from the glare and saw that, at the present rate of deceleration, the ship would reach, tail first, the outer wisps of the clouds of Venus in approximately fourteen minutes.

He said into the mike : "Fasten glare shields."

The mate's voice, from the loud-speaker, acknowledged the order.



The skipper could reach his cabin's solitary port-hole from his seat. With a heavy hand he swung the disc of amber to cover the quartz and fastened it with a snap. The amalgamated glare from Venus's albedo and the magnified sun itself was softened into a cool lemon light.

Once, when he was a small boy, he was on an Atlantic liner which ran into a heavy sea-mist when there was other shipping in the vicinity. The liner had crawled along, hooting, and from out of the blank white curtain, which hid even the sea, came other warning hoots. At the time he thought of the Captain on the bridge, and the weight of responsibility he was bearing, and he didn't envy him. But he trusted him. The skipper, he thought, wouldn't hold such a position if he weren't equal to the responsibility. They'd come through all right, he thought. And they did.

Now he himself was the Captain, with his ship about to enter impenetrable cloud. He looked at the TV screen and saw only whirling whiteness. There was a parallel but with an important difference. He couldn't stop his ship nor reverse it. He'd had to hand over to the computor which dealt with the mass and speed of the ship, the mass of Venus, and the readings of the radar altimeter.

But the altimeter, at this distance, could give only rough readings. There was solid land beneath the clouds, but the altimeter needle flickered back indecisively over divisions marking hundreds of yards. To be only one hundred yards out could be equivalent to dropping the ship to the ground from a height of 255 feet on Earth. It wouldn't do it much good nor the crew either.

Of course, that was if the clouds extended right to the ground, as by current theory they did. But if the ship broke through with, say, a mile of clear atmosphere to spare, he could see exactly what the altimeter couldn't tell him exactly, and so bring down the ship by manual control. He wished like hell he could do that. He didn't mind the responsibility so long as he had complete control. He trusted himself but not his luck.

The fact that the crew knew he was flying blindly by instruments didn't matter. Knowledge and belief were two different things. They still believed that he, personally, was responsible for their safety.

In anything like a gamble he had no luck. He'd once piled a ship on launching because he took a gamble with the weather: the storm broke at just the wrong moment. There were innumerable instances in space where he'd come near disaster not through lack of skill but lack of luck.

Which was why he'd always tried to hush up the fact that the "J" in his name stood for "Jonah."

He looked again at the blank video screen, thought of his TV set at home with the armchair and slippers and pipe-rack beside it, sighed, and decided that if he survived this coming adventure, he'd retire. He was getting too old for pioneering.

He was glad when George Starkey came in, very slowly, sagging a bit at the knees and clinging to the hand-rail. Starkey was young, and had none of the fears and pessimism of age.

"Well, Skip, nearly there."

There was no disciplining Starkey. He wasn't one of the crew. He was a professional explorer, tenacious, resourceful—and lucky. He'd done a lot of good work on Mars—good enough to qualify him for this first attempt on Venus. He had the unquenchable thirst to know what was on the other side of the hill. Sheer curiosity gave him unflagging energy. He also, the Captain reflected, had energy to spare for walking about the ship when it was under  $2g$ , and for making obvious and unnecessary remarks.

The Captain nodded briefly.

George Starkey looked at the infra-red visi-plate. It showed nothing much: just vague, spotty shadows.

"Not much help," he commented. "Still, it shows there's land there and not water. Guess the clouds must go all the way down if that's the best the infra-red can do."

"Maybe. Or maybe the clouds are thick with floating particles."

"Dust?"

"Or chemicals. There's carbon dioxide in them—but what else?"

George shrugged. "We'll soon know when Firkin gets a specimen."

He could stand no longer, and sank into a sprung chair. The braking drive was steadily increasing.

The Captain looked at the altimeter again. "Ten minutes—and then we shan't be able to see where we're going."

George grinned. "I've not been able to see that for the last ten minutes."

It was becoming hard to move one's jaws for talking now, and both fell silent.

The Captain thought back to his armchair and slippers on faraway Earth, and George thought forward to Venus. He felt one hundred per cent. alive with excitement and anticipation. Mars had been interesting, but the canals were a bad let-down. They were natural fissures, nothing more, and there'd been no sign of life above the insect level. It was a flat, featureless landscape, and there wasn't much to add to the astronomers' maps.

But Venus was something again. Here was complete mystery. Apart from the Moon, it was Earth's nearest neighbour. Almost the same size, a sister planet, yet wearing always a mask of cloud. He'd longed to get behind the mask, and now he was going to do it. Alive or dead.

The Captain stared at the dull infra-red screen and at the glowing green radar screen, trying to match the hints of contours. His fear was of mountain peaks. They must try for a level area. If the screens were to be believed, there were no undue prominences immediately below them.

One might be able to do a little with the side-jets beyond the clouds, later. Meantime, you could only sit and let the increasing pressure try to wrap the chair around you and push your shoulders up over your ears.

A frozen age passed. It was quite five minutes long.

Then they were in the clouds. By moving his eyes (it was all but impossible to turn his head) Captain Freiburg could watch all the screens and the port-hole. The yellow light began to fade into amber. It was like dusk falling rapidly. The selenium cell responded and did its duty: the electric lights came on. Beyond the glare shield the daylight faded to a dull glow. The clouds were something more substantial than mere water vapour.

They were 17,000 yards up when the first explosion happened. A flash somewhere outside sent a brief yellow flare into the cabin. The ship shook, and seemed to jump sideways with a bang. The gyroscopes pulled it back to balance.

Then it happened again. And again. Yellow flashes and the ship jumping this way and that, and the thuds of the explosions outside.

It was horrible to have to sit there, helpless, unable to move or say anything. They exchanged wordless questions with their eyes. What is it? What's happening?

The Captain thought: I've misread the screens. I'm trying to put her down on an active volcano. Just my luck.

George thought: What are these clouds made of? Have we started a chemical reaction in them through friction?

There was another flash, and a jar. Then it began to get lighter outside. The Captain was aware of it although he was keeping his eyes on the altimeter now.

11,000 yards.

They were falling through the underside of the clouds ever more slowly. He stole a look at the video screen: the surface of Venus was visible, in a dull grey light, like a rainy afternoon. There were mountains in the distances, whole ranges of them, white-capped. Below was a great rolling plain, dun-coloured, with patches of dirty green.

In the moment of his glance, the video registered a white flash some distance below and away, and from the flash a ball of black smoke sprang, opened, and broke. The ship's jets tore into the black wisps, shredding them.

Then he understood. The flashes were shell-bursts. They were being fired at.

He took the shock with calm. He could see what he was doing now, and was unafraid.

His foot eased itself on to the pedal controlling the speed of ejection. He was going to interfere, and to hell with the computor. The ship, which had been slowing, dropped suddenly like an elevator beneath their feet. The overplus of *g* lifted from them momentarily.

"Going to land?" jerked George.

"Have to." Freiburg hadn't time to explain why you couldn't reverse a rocket in mid-air and have it lift you out of range. The only chance was this sudden duck under, and a hope that the guns couldn't reach you on the ground. Perhaps there was a dip or a hollow . . .

He hadn't time, though, even to think about looking for one. They were approaching the ground much too fast. His foot moved again on the pedal and the impetus was checked with a suddenness which drove the air from their lungs with short, queer groans.

The jolt threw the Captain's foot off the pedal. Breathing hard, he tried to regain control. The ground was fearfully near. He got in a last burst before they hit it. It was just enough to save their lives. The ship landed with a jar that shook them from their chairs.

It remained perfectly vertical and motionless. To a layman everything might have seemed quite all right. But the crew knew just what such an impact must have done to the ship's fins. And it was suicide to take off with even one of those fins bent an inch out of straight.

Captain Jonah had wrecked another ship.

The wrecker lay there for a while with his eyes shut, in an abyss of misery. George came crawling across to him, began to feel his limbs. He opened his eyes and sat up wearily.

"I'm all right, George." It was the first time he'd used the explorer's first name. He thought: Who am I to claim any sort of authority?

George regarded him critically.

"Don't look so worried, Skip. You're not blaming yourself for this?"

"I—"

"They were shelling us, weren't they?"

"That's what it looked like."

"Okay, then, you did the only thing. You saved us. We're only a little bent, when we might have been blasted to pieces."

The Captain shrugged, and got up. He reached for the mike.

"How's everybody, Mister? Anyone hurt?"

The mate's voice came back just a little shakily: "All okay here. I don't know about Firkin—I'll go along and check."

"Right."

George pulled back the glare screen and looked out at Venus. It was quiet and still out there. The grey clouds hung high overhead, unbroken in any direction, in the distances dulling mistily almost to blackness. It looked as though at any moment the rain was going to fall like a cataract. Yet the earth appeared dry and cracked. It was yellow-brown and hard, with patches of thin grass here and there, and it was pockmarked with craters, five, ten, twenty yards in diameter. There was no sign of habitation or of any living thing. The light was too bad to see the horizon distinctly, but a darker blur seemed to lie along it.

The Captain looked over George's shoulder.

"A depressing outlook," said George, presently.

"You said it," said Freiburg, heavily.

The loudspeaker clicked and came alive. The mate's voice was still shaky. "Sir, Firkin appears to be dead."

The Captain felt another load laid on his shoulders. A flame of resentment flickered.

"Why 'appears'? Can't you tell? What happened?"

"I think you'd better come along to his cabin, sir, at once."

"Coming."

The Captain hadn't liked Firkin as a person, and as a person he was no loss. An opinionated, egocentric bore and whiner, alternately boasting or beefing. But a competent and conscientious analytic chemist, and invaluable on a trip like this.

George followed the skipper along the passages, down the ladder. The mate stood guard at Firkin's door, and he looked worried.

"Don't go in, sir. Just look through the peep-hole."

Firkin's cabin, which was also his laboratory, was airtight. In it he carried out his analyses of planetary atmosphere. There was a small glass panel in the door and you had to tap and get his indicated O.K. before you went in. He'd likely be wearing a pressure helmet, while you were unprotected, and you never knew what might have seeped in through the air-lock or out of the specimen bottles.

The Captain looked. Firkin wasn't wearing his helmet, so he hadn't started analyzing. Now he never would. He lay on his back, very still, face and body contorted. His mouth was half-open and so were his eyes. His face was congested, almost black. There was wet blood over his chin, and there seemed to be spots of it on the floor. It wasn't easy to be sure, because a thin white mist swirled about the cabin like cigarette smoke, and visibility wasn't good.

But two things were plain. The broken quartz specimen bottle at his side. The jagged slit in the outer wall of the cabin.

"What do you think of it, George?" asked the Captain.

George peered. "Looks like he captured a specimen of the cloud stratum all right, as per plan, but a shell splinter got in and broke the bottle under his nose. And it looks like that cloud-stuff is poisonous—he's been coughing blood."

"Yes. And there's still some gas in there—you can see it. You did a good job, Mister, by stopping us at the door. The only thing now is—how the devil are we going to tell if the atmosphere outside is breathable or not?"

"I think it is, sir." said the mate. "At least, it's not poisonous. Look along here."

He led them down the passage to where there was another rent in the outer wall. It was nearly three inches wide and you could see Venus through it.

"I guess that hit registered when we got below the clouds," said the mate. "But it don't seem to have made any difference."

George put his fingers over the hole. He could feel a steady inflow. He put his nose near the aperture, sniffed.

"Careful," the skipper warned.

"It's all right—just air, apparently. But the pressure's rather more than fifteen pounds to the square inch, I'd say, and it's beginning to even up in here."

"Well, that's something on the credit side at last. Looks like we shan't need spacesuits . . . How's the radio, Mister? Has Sparks got through again yet?"

"No, sir. That . . . crash landing smashed the set up quite a bit. He's working on it."

"Aw, hell." The nearer they'd got to the sun and its wavering stream of electrons, the worse radio communication with the Earth had been. Finally, static had drowned it out altogether. He was barred even from the small triumph of announcing the landing on Venus, but, on the other hand, he hadn't to reveal what a mess he'd made of it. He said, irritably: "Let's go outside and assess the damage."

The air out there was breathable, all right, but the density weighed on you a bit at first. It pressed against the ear-drums and everyone's voice sounded far too loud. In some way it and the grey light and the lowering clouds offset the slight lift which the lesser gravitation gave you. The Captain regarded the crumpled fins glumly.

"More than a week's work," he said.

George had brought his collapsible telescope and was staring around the horizon with it. "High mountains in that direction," he said. "Fifty miles off or more, I'd say. So far as I can see, all the rest looks like this—a plain."

"A plain," grunted the Captain. "Yes, and a battlefield. Those depressions look like shell craters to me. At a guess,

the Venusians are where we were half a century or more ago —on a pretty low level. We'll be lucky if we get out of this in one piece."

George snapped his telescope shut and looked at the skipper thoughtfully. What kind of talk was this, about getting out, when they'd only just got there?

Three other members of the crew came climbing down now to sample Venus. That left only the radio operator still in the ship, still struggling with his set. Everyone started wandering about examining the ground for any sign worth interest.

The Captain searched one of the bigger craters and found steel fragments of shell or bomb casing. There'd been a war on around here, sure enough. Under their cloud canopy the Venusians seemed to have been paralleling the Earthlings rather too closely.

George shouted and beckoned from a hundred yards off. The Captain went over. George pointed and said: "What d'you make of that?"

There was a perfectly straight slit along the ground, only two inches wide. There seemed no end to it. It led off unbroken in either direction as far as the eye could see, straight as a ruled line.

"I've followed it for several hundred yards. It just goes on and on," said George.

The skipper knelt and probed it. It was nearly a foot deep, the sides of hard-pressed earth narrowing down uniformly until they met along a wafer-thin groove.

"Queer," he said. "Looks as though someone's drawn a giant knife across the landscape. Are there any parallel marks of any kind?"

"I can't see any."

"Then how the devil does the knife hold up? I mean, if it were a sort of plough, there should be the marks of wheels or—or—*something* around here."

"Well, there aren't, Skip."

"What's it supposed to be? A boundary line?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I guess the only way to find out is to follow the line until we bump into whatever made it."

"I'll think about it, George. Maybe it'll be a better idea than your going around in that helicopter when we know there are A.-A. guns around. If you kept to the ground and along the line, at least we could follow your trail if need be. But I think we'd better keep together here for a bit, and let the natives approach *us*. They seem to be hostile, and we may need all hands here to beat off a possible attack. We'll set up a command post in one of these craters—I've a notion we'll be safer below ground——"

He broke off. From somewhere far off came a thin, keening wail, getting louder. The crew started to shout and point. There was something moving out there on the plain.

"Your telescope!" snapped the skipper, and George passed it to him. Even through the telescope the thing racing towards them was not easy to see in the poor light, especially as it was almost edge on. The Captain had once seen the wheel of a racing car come off and go bowling on by itself at a hundred miles an hour. Something like that was coming along the ground in their direction at about the same speed, but it was some twenty feet in diameter. An unattached wheel of solid, gleaming metal tapering down from the hub to an edge of extreme thinness. It was like the wheel off an enormous bacon-slicer, run amok.

"Everybody down the craters!" bawled the skipper.

The rising scream of the wheel's approach all but drowned his voice. He gesticulated frantically and the crew began running for the holes. When he saw they were safe, he ran with George at his side, to the nearest crater. It was pretty shallow, but if the wheel came their way its speed might carry it over them: he'd no doubt this frightening thing had cut that track, but that track was only a foot deep.

The scream of the wheel made the air quiver now, and the ground seemed to be quivering in sympathy. In one way the skipper was glad: it camouflaged his own quivering. The pair lay there with their heads down waiting for it to pass.

But the howling continued, deafeningly, accompanied by a secondary, steady swishing noise, like that of an electric fan.

A minute passed. The wheel, too, should have passed in that time. But the sounds of it and the shaking feel of its passage continued.

Slowly, circumspectly, they lifted their heads and peeped. The wheel was running in a wide circle about them and the whole group of craters, and the ship itself appeared to be the centre of the circle. So swiftly did the wheel pursue its circular course that there seemed to be dozens of blurred wheels chasing themselves around, forming a hazy, glimmering barrier twenty feet high.

George yelled : "It's got stuck in a groove!"

The skipper didn't know whether that was supposed to be a joke or not, and didn't bother to consider it. He bellowed back : "Come with me!"

He started running back to the ship. George jumped out of the crater and ran over the shaking ground after him. Heads popped out of craters here and there and watched them inquiringly. The skipper waved them back.

Inside the ship it was a little quieter.

"Get Sparks—bring him down to the armoury," gasped the skipper.

George nodded. He found the radio-op. staring out of his port-hole and trying to make sense of the scene outside. On the way down he told him about the wheel.

The skipper was getting out the tripod and light barrel of a bazooka. "I'll take this," he said. "Get a box of shells each and follow me."

The boxes weighed over forty pounds each on Earth and only a little less here. As George staggered with his down the passages, he called : "Have you spotted 'em, Skip?"

"Who?"

"I don't know. The Venusians, I suppose. Whoever's guiding the wheel."

"No. I'm going to have a shot at the wheel itself."

"Will it do much good?"

"It might stop this horrible din," said the skipper, grimly.

It smote their ears with full power again as they left the ship. The Captain started setting up the tripod a few yards away. George and Sparks dumped their boxes, opened them, and prepared the rocket shells.

It might have been his fancy, but George thought the wheel had slackened speed just a little. At least, there didn't seem quite so many wheels whirring around the perimeter. But that perimeter was still plainly impassable. However fast you tried to dash across it, before you were halfway over the groove that flashing wheel would have come full circle and sliced you in two.

The skipper was having trouble with the tripod, but waved away his proffered help impatiently.

The radio-op. was still fascinated by the wheel. He bawled in George's ear: "I think it's closing in on us."

George started and look more intently at the base of the blurred wall. Yes, there was a groove, practically a trench, over two feet wide now, and very slowly widening towards them. The keen edge of the wheel was paring its way inwards.

He thought of Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*—and was no happier for the thought. He wished the wheel would stand still for a moment so that he could get a good look at it. The skipper grabbed his ankle, tugged it.

"The shells!" he roared. "Quick-firing drill!"

George and Sparks quickly laid the eight shells in a line. The bazooka had an automatic firing device: it would fire the shells as fast as you fed them in.

The skipper opened fire at the centre of the moving, and yet seemingly stationary, wall, on a level with the hub. George and Sparks handed him the rocket shells rapidly and efficiently.

Whizz! Whizz! Whizz! Whizz!

Trailing fire and smoke the first four shells went darting out of the circle. They passed through the wall as though it were smoke itself, landing and bursting five hundred yards beyond it.

The skipper bit his lip, then let the last four go.  
Whizz! Whizz! Whizz! Whi—*Crash!*

They glimpsed a mid-air explosion and flung themselves flat as bits of shrapnel moaned and whirred about them and thudded into the earth. The very last shell had scored a hit. The howl had lost half its power suddenly.

Cautiously, they looked up. The wall of steel was still there, but not quite so solidly. You could glimpse the disc of its sole component spinning around with a band of daylight now encircling the hub. They'd blown a hole through the wheel near the hub—the rotary motion made it look like a band.

And the wheel had been thrust back against the far side of the trench it was cutting.

Before anyone could say a word, there was a roar like an express train coming, and suddenly a great cloud of black smoke burst with a splintering concussion thirty yards behind them. Only the body of the ship between it and them saved them. Shell fragments rushed through the air with ripping sounds that made their own brief shower of shrapnel sound by comparison mere bits of tinkling glass.

They didn't wait for the skipper to tell them what to do this time. They dashed for a deep crater and flung themselves into it. The skipper came crawling after them.

Then all hell broke loose.

Shells came shrieking down in a mad race all about them. The ground jolted and jumped continuously, throwing them inches in the air. George was on his side, on his stomach, on his back, on the skipper's back, on his face again with Sparks half across him: they were being rattled in their crater like dice in a box. Thick clouds of pungent, yellow gas came swirling in. The smell of burnt powder was everywhere, and the shrapnel fell like hail.

It seemed to last an age. Then it stopped, but their ears were still singing from the battering they'd had, and they didn't notice the cessation at once. Then slowly the sound of

the wheel took over again. It had fallen in pitch now, was only a kind of whirring drone.

"Phew! Someone doesn't like us," said George, presently. He put his hand to his cheek and found it wet with cold sweat.

Sparks made no comment. He'd bitten his lip badly, and was dabbing at it with a bloody handkerchief. The skipper inched his nose over the lip of the crater, and tried futilely to wave some of the gas away.

"Can't see a thing," he said. "Venus, the Goddess of Love, eh? We sure had a loving welcome . . . Ah, it's clearing a bit . . . There's something moving out there. Got your telescope, George?"

George passed it up. There was a distant grinding sound, audible above the wheel's drone.

"Tanks," said the skipper, peering. "Old-fashioned tanks, with guns on 'em." He turned the telescope slowly, scanning every direction. "We're surrounded by them," he said, presently. "They're closing in on us. Coming in for the kill."



## CHAPTER TWO

"I'LL get the bazooka," said George.

"No use," said the radio-op. indistinctly. He'd peeped over the rear edge of the crater. "It got a direct hit. It's in fifty pieces, and most of 'em aren't there."

"There's another in the ship," said George, starting up.

"Hold it!" said the skipper, authoritatively. "The barrage may come down again at any moment and catch you. It's not worth it. I've counted twenty-five tanks out there, and there's some other huge, queer thing behind them. Have a look, George. See what you can make of it."

George took the telescope. The wheel, continually passing across the line of vision like the shutter of a movie projector, made everything look flickery. But you could see the circle of tanks, with wide caterpillar treads and very squat turrets, about half a mile off. They were low-built things, seeming to hug the ground. Sixty-tonners, George guessed. They were converging slowly, gun muzzles aimed directly at the ship.

Behind them a sort of huge torpedo on wheels was skirmishing around. It was a hundred feet long, at least, with a pointed nose, cylindrical body, and back-projecting fins. It was made of dull metal, and darted swiftly over the ground on sheathed wheels. A thin, short streamer of white-hot gas flowed from its tail.

"Rocket-propelled," commented George. "I'd guess it's a travelling armoured H.Q., directing operations on the field. Why, it's near as big as our own ship!"

"Yes," said the skipper. "I think it's time to wave the white flag. We haven't a chance, and we didn't come here to fight them, anyway . . . H'm, the tanks have all stopped moving. What now?"

As they waited, tensely, the wheel's note, which had been falling, died about them. Even the secondary swishing noise, which was the sound of its keen edge cutting the air, fell to a sigh. It was bowling ever more slowly around. It began to wobble as it ran. They could see the hole in it distinctly now.

Then it heeled over and fell on its side, all momentum gone. It was still.

"It's served its purpose," said the skipper, taking off his jacket. "And that was to pin us down in the target area until the guns could be brought to bear. Did you see the air flutes on the hub? We'd blown 'em off on this side, but they're intact on the other side. That's where the howl came from—to demoralize us and petrify us. *Banzai!*"

"I don't think I'm gonna like these Venusians," said the radio-op., carefully. His lip had stopped bleeding, and he didn't want to start it off again.

"All the same, we'll have to try to be friendly," said the Captain. "Getting tough isn't going to help us get any place."

He'd got his white shirt off now. He draped it over the end of the telescope and waved it over the lip of the crater.

"That's a purely Terrestrial custom," said George. "It probably doesn't mean a thing here."

Bang! Bang! Bang! Three tank shells, on a flat trajectory, arrived before the sound of their passage. They burst near the base of the ship.

The skipper snatched his shirt back. "It means something, all right," he said, grimly. "The wrong thing."

Sparks made an inarticulate noise, and gasped: "The ship!"

They turned. The shell-bursts had loosened from the earth the battered fins of the space-ship. It groaned and began to cant. It was like the Tower of Pisa coming away from its foundations.

"It's going!" exclaimed George. Luckily, in relation to them it was falling sideways. It came down with an almighty crash, bounced once and rolled a couple of yards. The dust billowed up around it in a long, brown cloud, then slowly settled. The fallen ship lay as still as the fallen wheel.

The skipper used his shirt to mop his brow.

"That, I think, has put the finishing touch to your set, Sparks," he said.

The radio-op. nodded. His lower lip was bleeding once more, because he'd bitten it again in the same place.

Then they all jerked their heads the other way, because a roaring sound started way out on the plain.

"Gosh!" said the skipper. "This is no place for nerve cases. I'm getting the jitters. What the hell is it now?"

"The armoured H.Q.," said George, looking. "It's coming this way like a bullet."

They all looked. The great torpedo on wheels came hurtling head on towards them, its jets roaring. They could see only its blind pointed nose. It sped through the circle of stationary tanks, and the ground began to shake under its iron wheels.

"Down," said the skipper, almost wearily. He was getting sick of being in a sort of recurrent earthquake, bobbing up and down like a jack-in-the-box, being assailed by ear-shattering noises and uninvited missiles. The falling of the ship, his charge, had been the last straw, bringing him near cynical despair.

The roaring stopped, was supplanted by a high squealing, like huge brakes being applied. There came a silence. They were about to lift their heads again, when the grinding of twenty-five tanks moving at once grated through the heavy air.

George looked along the ground, caught the skipper's

glazing eye, and grinned at him wryly. The skipper tried to grin back, and failed. His expression said: "How much longer can this go on?"

It wasn't for much longer. After a few seconds, silence came again so suddenly that it seemed to have a noise of its own. This time the skipper was too apathetic to move. He lay there waiting dully for the next assault. The radio-op. lay beside him, with his red-soaked handkerchief pressed to the lower half of his face.

Cautiously, George stole a look outside. There was a new kind of shock awaiting him. All the tanks had turned in their tracks and were facing outwards, their long guns radiating like wheel-spokes. To the centre of the circle they presented their seemingly unprotected backs.

The great wheeled ship also presented its rear. It stood about two hundred yards off, and the only thing moving about it was a slight heat haze arising from its tail. No one was visible. Nothing but the haze moved anywhere. The grey clouds hung motionless over a picture of still life painted in low tones.

George spurred the reluctant skipper into taking a look.

The Captain grunted, gazing from under lowered, cynical lids. "Oh, I see, it's a game. They want us to chase them now. To hell with them! I'm going to see how the other guys are."

He shook off George's restraining hand and climbed out of the pit. He walked over to the craters where the others had gone to earth. One crater was there no longer. It had become a filled-in double grave.

The mate and the one other crew member were lying full-length at the bottom of their crater, face downwards. Shrapnel lay around like street rubbish, but none of it appeared to have touched them.

"Come on," said the skipper. "Time for chow."

He stood on the crater rim careless of the array of mechanism. He was beyond caring. Fate was using him for a football, and one could only shrug and sneer.

Slowly, the mate raised his grimy face. The shells had come rather nearer this refuge, and the tide of thick, sooty gas had washed over it many times. There were tear furrows down his cheeks. He might have been crying. It might have been the gas making his eyes stream.

"Milman's dead, sir."

The skipper frowned. "Sure? He doesn't look it."

"No, it was just one small splinter. In his right eye."

Captain Freiburg sighed. "Barker and Heinz are dead, too. And buried. That leaves only four of us. Just right for bridge. Got a deck of cards on you?"

The mate sat up. "No, sir." He was puzzled by the skipper's tone.

George came up in time to hear the last bit, and wasn't puzzled. He understood the skipper's tone. He knew he'd have to take charge for a while. Freiburg had thrown in his hand.

He examined Milman. Dead, all right. He clambered out and took a careful survey of the whole battlefield through his telescope. It was as before. Not a movement. And it still looked like rain.

The skipper was sitting on the edge of the crater, swinging his legs and filling his pipe.

George said: "You'll be all right there for a bit, Skip? I'm going over to try to contact H.Q. and find what side it's on."

The skipper nodded absently, busy with his pipe.

The mate said: "Can I come?"

"Sure, pal."

They started walking towards the big, dully gleaming hull of the torpedo thing. Sparks came hesitantly, at a diagonal, to join them. The blood was drying on his chin.

"Truce?" he asked.

"I just don't know," said George. "Be ready to duck if anything starts up."

Nothing did. They came up to the wheeled monster. They could see no signs of hatches or port-holes, and when they'd

walked around it, it was plain that the hull was a completely unbroken surface save for two, short, flexible rods, near the nose, backward-flung like antennæ.

George reached up, on his toes. He got one of the rods and pulled it. It waggled loosely, and sprang slowly back when he released it. The monster didn't seem offended. It ignored him.

He picked up a rock, banged it several times against the hull. The mate and Sparks stood a little way back lest the wheels started going round. But they didn't.

"No one at home," said George, tossing the rock away. "It's a complete mystery. Wonder if they *are* watching us through that hull in some way—one-way vision?"

In case that were so, he made what he considered to be friendly signs at the hull. It remained unresponsive. He threw up his hands.

"Maybe the tank drivers have something to say. Let's see."

They plodded over the cracked earth to the nearest tank, half expecting it to turn and cover them with its gun. (The guns protruded from the tanks' bodies, not their turrets, which were much too small.) But the whole arc of tanks they were approaching remained static, and docilely permitted themselves to be inspected.

The difference here was that the turret had a lid with a handle. George had to screw up his courage to clamber on to the first tank and try to open it up. But soon all three of them were doing it on the tanks, and finding exactly the same thing. The lid came up with a twist of the handle. Inside was the breech of the self-loading gun, with its automatic ammunition feed; a certain amount of what seemed to be radar apparatus, with a tiny screen; and a man-sized driving seat, with a video screen and an instrument panel before it.

Everything seemed to be there—except the driver.

They came together again to compare notes. The notes were identical. All the tanks were driverless.

"They couldn't have got out—we'd have seen 'em go," said Sparks.

"Perhaps there's another trap in the floor, and they've sunk through it into the ground," said the mate, who wasn't without humour when there wasn't much to be afraid of.

"It's remote control, with what might be provision for manual control," said George. "But where are the controllers? Playing possum in that cigar on wheels? Or way in the distance somewhere?"

"I think they're in the cigar," said the mate. "Stuck, because the power's failed. That thing came charging towards us bent on murder. Then something—perhaps the discovery that its batteries were running out?—made it turn round to go back. All the tanks turned round, too, at the same time: they must be powered from that thing. But it ran out of gas or something and stopped dead. Perhaps we'd better get back before they refill it or repair it."

George scratched his head. He was looking at the big white O painted on the nearest tank.

"I suppose that's a distinguishing mark," he said, "but they've all got the same letter—or circle."

"Or zero," said Sparks.

"Listen," said the mate. There was a distant heavy drone.

"Coming from the sky," said Sparks. "Aeroplanes."

"Let's get back," said George, and they started off. The drone grew behind them, ballooning up over their heads menacingly. They looked back and up over their shoulders and saw only the grey mask of the sky.

The skipper was still sitting there, smoking his pipe reflectively. If he'd heard the droning, he didn't seem bothered by it.

"Hello, boys. Learned anything?"

"Yes, and no," said George. The droning worried him. He gazed up.

"They're either above or in the clouds," he said. "Probably they don't know we're here. They'll pass over."

With a shrieking crescendo the first sheaf of bombs dropped on an arc of the tank perimeter, and two of the tanks were

flung in the air like playthings. The blast sent them all headlong into the crater on top of the dead Milman. The skipper somehow escaped it, and sat there looking slightly surprised. George grabbed his legs and pulled him in.

"My pipe!" said the skipper, sounding injured. He scrabbled for it.

The war began again. All round the distant skirts of the plain unseen A.-A. guns opened up, firing at the equally invisible enemy in the sky. This time the tanks and the wheeled thing took no part in it—except as targets for the bombs.

The people in the crater, although they heard plenty, saw little of the battle. They were piled in a heap, and even those at the bottom felt horribly exposed to the objects dropping from the grey, poisonous clouds. Mostly these were bombs, but sometimes they were great chunks of wreckage from flying machines the A.-A. guns had hit. Amid unending thunder, the sky rained destruction, and they could only lie there and take it.

Then the droning, somewhat lessened, died away towards the west. The bombing had ceased, and the guns, except in the west, were quietening down.

Then all was quiet again.

George counted heads. By some miracle, they were all still there, including Milman's, which remained the only dead one. There were a few bruises and grazes, and the radio-op.'s unlucky and ill-used lip was bleeding again: it was the only real blood.

The skipper was looking thoughtful, and George hoped it was a good sign.

Sparks said thickly: "What I really need is a gum-shield, but has anyone got a spare handkerchief?"

The mate gave him one silently. He wasn't feeling humorous at the moment.

George stood up. His head ached from the concussions. A little dazedly, he took stock again of this noisy corner of Venus. All twenty-five tanks were there, but several of them

had been shifted around a bit by blast, and three lay on their sides and one on its back: positions from which it seemed unlikely they could operate. If the "cigar" had been touched, it didn't show it: possibly its armour was impervious to bomb splinters. It stood squarely and impassively on its wheels in the same spot.

But in the vaporous distance other things were moving. Towards them, it seemed. George turned the telescope on them, and groaned. Another tank attack was developing.

He slumped back into the crater. He was beginning to feel something of the skipper's despair. What was the use? There was no surcease. You couldn't hit back and you couldn't run. You just had to grovel there and take this battering from people you couldn't see, not knowing even what they looked like nor why they should go to these lengths to kill you without a parley or a warning. His vision of himself exploring Venus shrank to a pitiful picture of himself cowering in a hole until he was killed, by unknowns for an unknown reason. It was senseless and unjust.

He told the others. The Captain shrugged, and said nothing. The mate glowered and said no more. Sparks couldn't have said anything, anyway: his lip was too sore. He just rolled his eyes up, to indicate a sort of pathetic, half-humorous acceptance, and lay back.

Suddenly, and in concord, those tanks about them which were still right way up began to move. They jockeyed slowly backwards, forming a smaller, tighter, but whole circle. When the circle was complete, they stopped. The wheeled thing didn't move.

George said. "You know, I don't think the power was ever off. I believe they're taking up positions to defend us!"

The others were jerked out of their apathy.

"Turncoats?" said the mate. "I don't get it. They were trying to shoot us to pieces."

The skipper still said nothing, but he was becoming interested in things again. He watched intently.

The tanks in their own circle opened fire first. Presently the watchers saw why. The more distant, advancing tanks were smaller and much swifter, but had correspondingly smaller armament; the bigger tanks were taking advantage of their own greater range. There were fifty or more of the smaller tanks, though, and they whirred around like desert beetles, making themselves into difficult targets. They began dashing in to take quick shots with their own guns, then zig-zagging off again. They didn't always get away with it.

It was exciting to watch, but dangerous. Shells were flying all ways. But the men peeping over the rim of the crater believed that this time they were neutral, and nothing was deliberately aimed at them. Therefore, illogically, they felt safer.

The feeling was short-lived. A small enemy tank dashed in between two of their own (they were beginning to look upon them as their own) knocked-out tanks, breaking into the defensive ring, and came charging on towards them, squirting shells as it came. They were small shells, and whizzed harmlessly over the fallen space-ship behind them.

Before the tank could depress its gun elevation, the great torpedo-shaped ship on wheels suddenly came to life with a roar of rocket vents. With terrific acceleration it bore down on the small tank and shouldered it out of its path as a mad bull charges a hapless, dismounted picador. There was a sound like the clash of giant cymbals. The tank rolled helplessly on its back, like a turtle. Its tracks churned the air uselessly. The wheeled monster pulled up almost in its own length with a great shrieking of brakes. It became quiescent again.

George became aware of the skipper beside him, a fellow witness, and bawled in his ear: "They're very much alive in the H.Q.!"

The captain nodded, and pointed at the helpless tank. He shouted something back, but the din of battle drowned it except for the word "Triangle!"

(Continued on page 71.)

# Is there too much?

*Guest Article by Arthur C. Clarke*

*Most of our readers will know that Mr. Clarke is Chairman of the British Interplanetary Society and author of two technical books on space flight. He is also the author of several science-fiction novels and a great many short stories. As well as being at the top of British science fiction, Arthur Clarke is also acknowledged to be the greatest expert in this country on the science of space flight.*

At the moment there are, I believe, more than thirty magazines on both sides of the Atlantic devoted exclusively to science fiction. This represents a multiplication by about ten in the short period since the war. At the same time, the number of books and anthologies has increased by a factor which is almost as great. It would be interesting to know if there is anyone nowadays who reads *all* the science fiction published—as many of us did in the bad old days.

It would be still more interesting to know how they manage to get all those packing cases smuggled past the asylum guards...

Of course, all true devotees of imaginative literature rejoice that the famine has ended. But sometimes we wonder. Among these tottering piles of polychromatic pulp, how many masterpieces are submerged and sunk into oblivion because no one has time to read them? In sheer self-defence, one is forced to concentrate on a handful of magazines, leaving the rest unread. As a result there is often a haunting feeling that a lot of good stories are being missed.

One can only hope that the anthologists, busily ferreting through the files—or perhaps a better comparison would be searching like pearl-divers among slime—

will see that nothing worth-while is permanently lost.

One is tempted to say that a good ninety per cent. of what is published as science fiction would be very much better lost. Yet, in more mellow moods, one pauses to wonder. In all of its branches and categories, literature forms a continuous spectrum from the very good to the very bad. The great romantic novel is not condemned because of the oceans of slush which surround it. The classic detective story will probably survive its contemporary degraders.

But it's a free country (or so it is rumoured) and people are still at liberty to choose what they prefer to read. It is not necessarily true that men love the highest when they see it. Still, many readers have undoubtedly discovered the great classics of science fiction after being introduced to the *genre* through the pulpiest of the pulps.

It is not likely that there will ever be too much *good* science fiction. And since all authors occasionally get out of the wrong side of the bed, there will always be some bad science fiction. On the whole, it probably doesn't do much harm—and it does save some poor devil from the terrible fate of having to work for a living!

*Arthur C. Clarke*

AMERICA'S FOREMOST SCIENCE-FICTION  
WRITER

RAY BRADBURY'S  
**Welcome, Brothers!**

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*They came to Mars and met a welcome  
beyond imagination*

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*Illustrated by FICSHER*

THE ship came down from space. It came down from the stars and the black velocities, and the shining movements and the silent gulfs of space. It was a new ship, the only one of its kind; it had fire in its belly and men in its body, and it moved with clean silence, fiery and hot. In it were seventeen men, including a captain. A crowd had gathered on the tarmac who shouted and waved their hands up into the sunlight, and the rocket had jerked up, bloomed out great flowers of heat and colour, and run away into space on the first voyage to Mars!

Now it was decelerating with metal efficiency in the upper zones of Martian atmosphere. It was still a thing of beauty and strength. It had shorn through meteor streams, it had moved in the majestic black midnight waters of space like a pale sea leviathan, it had passed the sickly, pocked mass of the

ancient moon, and thrown itself onwards into one nothingness following another.

The men within it had been battered, thrown about, sickened, made well again, scarred, made pale, flushed each in his turn. One man had died after a fall, but now, seventeen of the original eighteen, with their eyes clear in their heads, and their faces pressed to the thick glass portholes of the rocket, were watching Mars swing up under them.

"Mars! Mars! Good old Mars, here we are!" cried Navigator Petersen.

"Good old Mars!" said Hinkston, the archaeologist.

"Well," said Captain John Black.

The ship landed softly on a lawn of green grass. Outside, upon the lawn, stood an iron deer. Further up the lawn, a tall brown Victorian house sat in the quiet sunlight, all covered with scrolls and rococo, its windows made of blue and pink and yellow and green coloured glass. Upon the verandah were hairy geraniums and an old swing which was hooked into the verandah arch and which now swung back and forth, back and forth, in a little breeze.

At the top of the house was a cupola with diamond, leaded-glass windows, and a dunce-cap roof! Through the front window you could see an ancient piano with yellow keys and a piece of music entitled *Sweet Thames* sitting on the music rest.

Around the rocket in four directions spread the little town, green and motionless in the Martian spring. There were white houses and red brick ones, and tall elm trees blowing in the wind, and tall maples and horsechestnuts. And church steeples with golden bells silent in them.

The men in the rocket looked out and saw this. Then they looked at one another, and then they looked out again. They held on to each other's elbows, suddenly unable to breathe, it seemed. Their faces grew pale and they blinked constantly, running from glass porthole to glass porthole of the ship.

"I'll be damned," whispered Petersen, rubbing his face with his numb fingers, his eyes wet. "Who'd have believed it!"



"It can't be, it just can't be," said Hinkston.

"Good Lord," said Captain John Black.

There was a call from the chemist. "Sir, the atmosphere is fine for breathing, sir."

Black turned slowly. "Are you sure?"

"No doubt of it, sir."

"Then we'll go out," said Petersen.

"Yes, indeed," said Hinkston.

"Hold on," said Captain John Black. "Just a moment. Nobody gave any orders."

"But, sir——"

"Sir, nothing. How do we know what this is?"

"We know what it is, sir," said the chemist. "It's a small town with good air in it, surely."

"And it's a small town just like Earth towns," said Hinkston, the archaeologist. "Incredible. It can't be, but it is."

Captain John Black looked at him, idly. "Do you think that the civilizations of two planets can progress at the same rate and evolve in the same way, Hinkston?"

"I wouldn't have thought so, sir."

Captain Black stood by the port. "Look out here. The geraniums. A specialized plant. That specific variety has only been known on Earth for fifty years. Think of the thousands of years of time it takes to evolve plants. Then tell me if it is logical that the Martians should have: one, leaded glass windows; two, cupolas; three, porch swings; four, an instrument that looks like a piano and probably is a piano; and, five, if you look closely, if a Martian composer could have published a piece of music titled, strangely enough, *Sweet Thames*. All of which suggests that we have a Thames river here on Mars!"

"It is quite strange, sir."

"Strange, hell; it's absolutely impossible, and I suspect the whole ruddy set up. Something's wrong here, and I'm not leaving the ship until I know what it is."

"Oh, sir," said Petersen.

" Damn it," said Hinkston. " Sir, I want to investigate this at first hand. It may be that there are similar patterns of thought, movement, civilization on *every* planet in our system. We may be on the threshold of the greatest psychological and metaphysical discovery of our time, sir, don't you think?"

" I'm willing to wait a moment," said Captain John Black.

" It may be, sir, that we are looking upon a phenomenon that, for the first time, would absolutely prove the existence of a God, sir."

" There are many people who are of good faith without such proof, Mr. Hinkston."

" I'm one myself, sir. But certainly a thing like this, out there," said Hinkston, " could not occur without divine intervention, sir. It fills me with such terror and elation I don't know whether to laugh or cry, sir."

" Do neither, then, until we know what we're up against."

" Up against, sir?" enquired Petersen. " I see that we're up against nothing. It's a good, quiet, country town, much like the one I was born in, and I like the looks of it."

" When were you born, Petersen?"

" In 1910, sir."

" That makes you fifty years old now, doesn't it?"

" This being 1960, yes, sir."

" And you, Hinkston?"

" 1920, sir. In Berkshire. And this looks good to me, sir."

" This couldn't be Heaven," said the captain, ironically. " Though, I must admit, it looks peaceful and cool, and pretty much like the South Riding, where I was born in 1915." He looked at the chemist. " The air's all right, is it?"

" Yes, sir."

" Well, then, tell you what we'll do. Petersen, you and Hinkston and I will fetch ourselves out to look this town over. The other fourteen men will stay aboard ship. If anything untoward happens, lift the ship and get the hell out. Do you hear what I say, Cramer?"

" Yes, sir. The hell out we'll go. Leaving you?"

"A loss of three men's better than a whole ship. If something bad happens, get back to Earth and warn the next Rocket. That's Lingle's Rocket, I think, which will be completed and ready to take off some time around next Christmas. Tell him what he has to look out for. If there's something hostile about Mars we certainly want the next expedition to be well armed."

"So are we, sir. We've got a regular arsenal with us."

"Tell the men to stand by the guns, then, as Petersen and Hinkston and I go out."

"Right, sir."

"Come along, Petersen, Hinkston."

The three men walked together, down through the levels of the ship.

It was a beautiful spring day. A robin sat on a blossoming apple tree and sang continuously. Showers of petal snow sifted down when the wind touched the apple tree, and the scent of blossom drifted upon the air. Somewhere in the town, somebody was playing the piano, and the music came and went, came and went, softly, drowsily. The song was *Beautiful Dreamer*. Somewhere else, a gramophone, scratchy and faded, was hissing out a record of *Roamin' In The Gloamin'*, sung by Harry Lauder.

The three men stood outside the ship. The port closed behind them. At every window, a face pressed, looking out. The large metal guns pointed this way and that, ready.

Now the gramophone record being played was :

*Oh give me a June night*

*The moonlight and you—*

Petersen began to tremble. Hinkston did likewise.

Hinkston's voice was so feeble and uneven that the captain had to ask him to repeat what he had said. "I said, sir, that I think I have solved this, all of this, sir!"

"And what is the solution, Hinkston?"

The soft wind blew. The sky was serene and quiet and somewhere a stream of water ran through the cool caverns

and tree-shadings of a ravine. Somewhere, a horse and cart trotted and rolled by, bumping.

"Sir, it must be, it has to be, this is the *only* solution ! Rocket travel began to Mars in the years before the first World War, sir !"

The captain stared at his archæologist. "No!"

"But yes, sir ! You must admit, look at all of this ! How else can you explain it—the houses, the lawns, the iron deer, the flowers, the pianos, the music !"

"Hinkston, Hinkston, oh !" And the captain put his hand to his face, shaking his head, his hand shaking now, his lips blue.

"Sir, listen to me." Hinkston took his elbow persuasively and looked up into the captain's face, pleading. "Say that there were some people in the year 1905, perhaps, who hated wars and wanted to get away from Earth and they got together some scientists, in secret, and built a rocket and came out here to Mars."

"No, no, Hinkston."

"Why not ? The world was a different place in 1905 ; they could have kept it a secret much more easily."

"But the work, Hinkston, the work of building a complex thing like a rocket, oh, no, no." The captain looked at his shoes, looked at his hands, looked at the houses, and then at Hinkston.

"And they came up here, and naturally the houses they built were similar to Earth houses, because they brought the cultural architecture with them, and here it is !"

"And they've lived here all these years?" said the captain.

"In peace and quiet, sir, yes. Maybe they made a few trips, to bring enough people here for one small town, and then stopped, for fear of being discovered. That's why the town seems so old-fashioned. I don't see a thing, myself, that is older than the year 1927, do you?"

"No, frankly, I don't, Hinkston."

"These are *our* people, sir. This is an English city!"

"That—that's right, too, Hinkston."

"Or maybe—just maybe—sir, rocket travel is older than we think. Perhaps it started in some part of the world hundreds of years ago, was discovered and kept secret by a small number of men, and they came to Mars, with only occasional visits to Earth over the centuries."

"You make it sound almost reasonable."

"It is, sir. It has to be. We have the proof here before us. All we have to do now is find some people and verify it!"

"You're right, there, of course. We can't just stand here and talk. Did you bring your gun?"

"Yes, but we won't need it."

"We'll see about it. Come along, we'll ring that doorbell and see if anyone is home."

Their boots were deadened of all sound in the thick green grass. It smelled from a fresh mowing. It spite of himself, Captain John Black felt a great peace come over him. It had been thirty years since he had been in a small town, and the buzzing of spring bees on the air lulled and quieted him, and the fresh look of things was a balm to the soul.

Hollow echoes sounded from under the boards as they walked across the verandah and stood before the open door. Inside, they could see a bead curtain hung across the hall, and a crystal chandelier and a water-colour framed on one wall over a comfortable Morris chair. The house smelled old, and of the attic, and infinitely comfortable. You could hear the tinkle of ice rattling in a water jug. In a distant kitchen, because of the heat of the day, someone was preparing a soft lemon drink.

Captain John Black rang the bell.

Footsteps, dainty and thin, came along the hall, and a kind-faced lady of some forty years, dressed in the sort of dress you might expect in the year 1909, peered out at them.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Beg your pardon," said Captain Black, uncertainly. "But we're looking for—that is, could you help us, I mean." He stopped. She looked out at him with dark, wondering eyes.

" If you're selling something," she said, " I'm much too busy and I haven't time." She turned to go.

" No, *wait*," he cried bewilderedly. " What town is this?"

She looked him up and down as if he were crazy. " What do you mean, what town is it? How could you be in a town and not know what town it was?"

The captain looked as if he wanted to go and sit under a shady apple tree. " I beg your pardon," he said. " But we're strangers here. We're from Earth, and we want to know how this town got here and you got here."

" Are you census takers?" she asked.

" No," he said.

" What do you want, then?" she demanded.

" Well," said the captain.

" Well?" she asked.

" How long has this town been here?" he wondered.

" It was built in 1868," she snapped at them. " Is this a game?"

" No, not a game," cried the captain. " Oh, God," he said. " Look here. We're from Earth!"

" From *where*?" she said.

" From Earth!" he said.

" Where's that?" she said.

" From Earth," he cried.

" Out of the ground, do you mean?"

" No, from the planet Earth!" he almost shouted. " Here," he insisted, " come out on the porch and I'll show you."

" No," she said, " I won't come out there; you are all evidently quite mad from the sun."

Petersen and Hinkston stood behind the captain. Hinkston now spoke up. " You don't understand, ma'am," he said. " We came in a flying ship across space, among the stars. We came from the third planet from the sun, Earth, to this planet, which is Mars. Now do you see?"

" Mad from the sun," she said, taking hold of the door. " Go away now, before I call my husband, who's upstairs taking a nap, and he'll beat you all with his fists."

"But——" said Hinkston. "This is Mars, is it not?"

"This," explained the woman, as if she were addressing a child, "is England, on the Continent of Europe, on a place called the world, or, sometimes, the Earth. Go away, now. Goodbye!"

She slammed the door.

The three men stood before the door with their hands up in the air towards it, as if pleading with her to open it once more.

They looked at one another.

"Let's knock the door down," said Petersen.

"We can't," sighed the captain.

"Why not?"

"She didn't do anything she hadn't a right to do, did she? We're the strangers here. This is private property. Great Scot, Hinkston!" He went and sat down on the verandah.

"What, sir?"

"Did it ever strike you that, maybe, we got ourselves, somehow, some way fouled up? And, by accident, came back and landed on Earth!"

"My word, you may be right!" And Hinkston sat down numbly and thought about it.

Petersen stood up in the sunlight. "How could we have done that?"

"I don't know, just let me think."

Hinkston said: "But we checked every mile of the way, and we saw Mars and our chronometers said so many miles gone, and we went past the moon and out, out into space, and here we are, on Mars. I'm sure we're on Mars, sir."

Petersen said: "But, suppose—just suppose—that, by accident, in space, in time, or something, we landed on a planet in space, in another time. Suppose this is Earth, thirty or fifty years ago? Maybe we got lost in the dimensions, do you think?"

"Oh, go away, Petersen."

"Are the men in the ship keeping an eye on us, Hinkston?"

"At their guns, sir."

Petersen went to the door, rang the bell. When the door opened again, he asked : " What year is this? "

" 1926, of course!" cried the woman, furiously, and slammed the door again.

" Did you hear that? " Petersen ran back to them, wildly. " She said 1926 ! We *have* gone back in time ! This *is* Earth ! "

Petersen sat down, and the three men let the wonder and terror of the thought afflict them. Their hands stirred fitfully on their knees. The wind blew, nodding the locks of hair on their heads.

The captain stood up. " I never thought it would be like this. It scares the life out of me. How can a thing like this happen? "

" Will anybody in the whole town believe us? " wondered Hinkston. " Are we playing around with something dangerous? Time, I mean. Shouldn't we just take off and go home? "

" No. We'll try another house."

They walked three houses down to a little white cottage under an oak tree. " I like to be as logical as I can get, " said the captain. He nodded at the town. " How does this sound to you, Hinkston? "

" Suppose, as you said originally, that rocket travel occurred years ago. And when the Earth people had lived here a number of years they began to get homesick for Earth. Homesickness so intense that it threatened the very foundations of their new life. What would you do, faced with such a problem? Supposing you had the absolute say-so in the place. "

Hinkston thought. " Well, I think I'd rearrange the civilization on Mars so it resembled Earth more and more each day. If there was any way of reproducing every plant, every road and every lake, and even an ocean, I would do so. Then I would, by some vast crowd hypnosis, theoretically anyway, convince everyone in a town this size that this really *was* Earth, not Mars at all. "

" Good enough, Hinkston. I think we're on the right track now. That woman in that house back there just *thinks* she's

living on Earth. It protects her sanity. She and all the others in this town are the patients of the greatest experiment in migration and hypnosis you will ever lay your eyes on in your life."

"That's it, sir!" cried Petersen.

"Well," the captain sighed. "Now we're getting somewhere. I feel better. It all sounds a bit more logical now. This talk about time and going back and forth and travelling in time turns my stomach upside down. But, *this way*—" He actually smiled for the first time in a month. "Well, it looks as if we'll be fairly welcome here."

"Or, will we, sir?" said Petersen. "After all, these people came here to escape Earth. Maybe they won't be too happy to see us, sir. Maybe they'll try to drive us out or kill us?"

"We have superior weapons if that should happen. Any-way, all we can do is try. This house next now. Up we go."

But they had hardly crossed the lawn when Petersen stopped and looked off across the town, down the quiet, dreaming afternoon street. "Sir," he said.

"What is it, Petersen?" asked the captain.

"Oh, sir, sir, what I see, what I do see now before me, oh, oh—" said Petersen, and he began to cry like a child. His fingers came up, twisting and trembling, and his face was all wonder and joy and incredulity.

He sounded as if any moment he might go quite insane with happiness. He looked down the street and he began to run, stumbling awkwardly, falling, picking himself up, and running on, crying: "Oh, God, God, thank you, God! Thank you!"

"Don't let him get away!" The captain broke into a run.

Now Petersen was running at full speed, shouting. He turned into a yard half way down the little shady side street and leaped up upon the porch of a large green house with an iron rooster on the roof.

He was beating upon the door, shouting and crying when Hinkston and the captain ran up and stood in the yard.

The door opened, and Petersen, in a high wail of discovery and happiness, cried out : " Grandma ! Grandpa ! "

Two old people stood in the doorway, their faces lighting up.

" Albert ! " Their voices piped and they rushed out to embrace and pat him on the back and move around him. " Albert, oh, Albert, it's been so many years ! How you've grown, boy ; how big you are. Oh, Albert, boy, how are you ? "

" Grandma, Grandpa ! " sobbed Albert Petersen. " It's good to see you ! You look fine, fine ! Oh, fine ! " He held them, turned them round, kissed them, hugged them, cried on them, held them away again, blinking at the little old people. The sun was in the sky, the wind blew, the grass was green, the door stood open.

" Come in, lad, come in ; there's lemonade for you—fresh, lots of it ! "

" Grandma, Grandpa, good to see you ! I've got friends down here ! Here ! " Petersen turned and waved wildly at the captain and Hinkston, who, all during the meeting on the verandah, had stood in the shade of a tree, holding on to each other. " Captain, captain, come up, come up ; I want you to meet my grandparents ! "

" Welcome ! " said the old people. " Any friend of Albert's is ours, too ! Don't stand there with your mouths open ! Come on in ! "

In the living room of the old house it was cool, and a grandfather clock ticked high and long and bronzed in one corner. There were soft pillows on large couches, and walls filled with books and a rug cut in a thick rose pattern and antimacassars pinned to furniture, and lemonade in the hand, cool on the thirsty tongue.

" Here's to our health. " Grandma tipped her glass to her porcelain teeth.

" How long have you *been* here, Grandma ? " said Petersen.

"A good many years," she said, tartly. "Ever since we died."

"Ever since you what?" asked Captain John Black, putting his drink down.

"Oh, yes." Petersen looked at his captain. "They've been dead thirty years."

"And you *sit* there calmly!" cried the captain.

"Tush," said the old woman, and winked glitteringly at John Black. "Who are we to question what happens? Here we are. What's life, anyway? Who does what for why and where? All we know is here we are, alive again, and no questions asked. A second chance." She toddled over and held out her thin wrist to Captain John Black. "Feel." He felt. "Solid, aren't I?" she asked. He nodded. "You hear my voice, don't you?" she enquired. Yes, he did. "Well, then," she said in triumph, "why go around questioning?"

"Well," said the captain, "it's simply that we never thought we'd find a thing like this on Mars."

"And now you've found it, I dare say there's lots on every planet that'll show you God's infinite ways."

"Is this Heaven?" asked Hinkston.

"Nonsense, no. It's a world and we get a second chance. Nobody told us why. But then nobody told us why we were on Earth, either. That *other* Earth, I mean. The one you came from. How do we know there wasn't *another* before *that* one?"

"A good question," said the captain.

The captain stood up and slapped his hand on his leg in an offhand fashion. "We've got to be going. It's been nice. Thank you for the drinks."

He stopped. He turned and looked towards the door, startled.

Far away, in the sunlight, there was a sound of voices, a crowd, a shouting and a great hello.

"What's that?" asked Hinkston.

"We'll soon find out!" And Captain John Black was out

the front door abruptly, running across the green lawn and into the street of the Martian town.

He stood looking at the ship. The ports were open and his crew were streaming out, waving their hands. A crowd of people had gathered, and in and through and among these people the members of the crew were running, talking, laughing, shaking hands. People did little dances. People swarmed. The rocket lay empty and abandoned.

A brass band exploded in the sunlight, flinging off a gay tune from upraised tubas and trumpets. There was a bang of drums and a shrill of fifes. Little girls with golden hair jumped up and down. Little boys shouted "Hooray!" And fat men passed around sixpenny cigars.

The mayor of the town made a speech. Then, each member of the crew, with a mother on one arm, a father or sister on the other, was spirited off down the street, into little cottages or big mansions, and doors slammed shut.

The wind rose in the clear spring sky and all was silent. The brass band had banged off round a corner, leaving the rocket to shine and dazzle alone in the sunlight.

"Abandoned!" cried the captain. "Abandoned the ship they did! I'll have their skins, by heaven! They had orders!"

"Sir," said Petersen. "Don't be too hard on them. Those were all old relatives and friends."

"That's no excuse!"

"Think how they felt, captain, seeing familiar faces outside the ship!"

"I would have obeyed orders! I would have—" The captain's mouth remained open.

Striding along the sidewalk under the Martian sun, tall, smiling, eyes blue, face tanned, came a young man of some twenty-six years.

"John!" the man cried, and broke into a run.

"What?" said Captain John Black. He swayed.

"John, you old beggar, you!"

The man ran up and gripped his hand and slapped him on the back.

"It's you," said John Black.

"Of course, who'd you *think* it was?"

"Edward!" The captain appealed now to Petersen and Hinkston, holding the stranger's hand. "This is my brother Edward. Ed, meet my men, Petersen, Hinkston! My brother!"

They tugged at each other's hands and arms and then finally embraced. "Ed!" "John, you old scallywag, you!" "You're looking fine, Ed; but, Ed, what is this? You haven't changed over the years. You died, I remember, when you were twenty-six, and I was nineteen—oh, God, so many years ago—and here you are; and, Lord, what goes on, what goes on?"

Edward Black gave him a brotherly knock on the chin. "Mother's waiting," he said.

"Mother?"

"And Dad, too."

"And Dad?" The Captain almost fell to earth as if hit upon the chest with a mighty weapon. He walked stiffly and awkwardly, out of co-ordination. He stuttered and whispered and talked only one or two words at a time. "Mother alive? Dad? Where?"

"At the old house on Oak Knoll Avenue."

"The old house." The captain stared in delighted amazement. "Did you *hear* that, Hinkston?"

"I know it's hard for you to believe."

"But alive. Real."

"Don't I *feel* real?" The strong arm, the firm grip, the white smile. The light, curling hair.

Hinkston was gone. He had seen his own house down the street and was running for it. Petersen was grinning. "Now you understand, sir, what happened to everybody on the ship. They couldn't help themselves."

"Yes. Yes," said the captain, eyes shut. "Yes." He put out his hand. "When I open my eyes, you'll be gone." He opened his eyes. "You still here? Heavens above, Edward, you look fine!"

## WELCOME, BROTHERS!

"Come along, lunch is waiting for you. I told Mother." Petersen said: "Sir, I'll be here if you want me."

"What? Oh, fine, Petersen. Later, then."

Edward grabbed his arm and marched him. "You need support."

"I do. My knees are all funny. And my stomach's loose."

"There's the house. Remember it?"

"Remember it? What a question! I bet I can beat you to the door!"

They ran. The wind roared over Captain John Black's ears. The earth roared under his feet. He saw the golden figure of Edward Black pull ahead of him in the amazing dream of reality. He saw the house rush forward, the door swing open. "Beat you!" cried Edward, bounding up the steps. "I'm an old man," panted the captain, "and you're still young. But, then, you *always* beat me, I remember!"

In the doorway stood his Mother, pink and plump and bright. And behind her, pepper-grey, Dad, with his pipe in his hand.

"Mother, Dad!"

He ran up the steps like a child, to meet them.

It was a fine long afternoon. They finished lunch and they sat in the living room, and he told them all about his rocket and his being captain, and they nodded and smiled upon him; and Mother was just the same, and Dad bit the end off a cigar and lighted it in his old fashion.

Mother brought in some tea in the middle of the afternoon. Then there was a big turkey dinner at night, and time flowing on. When the drums ticks were sucked clean and lay brittle upon the plates, the captain leaned back in his chair and exhaled his deep contentment. Dad poured him a small glass of dry sherry. It was seven-thirty in the evening. Night was in all the trees and colouring the sky, and the lamps were halos of dim light in the gentle house. From all the other houses down the streets came sounds of music, pianos playing, laughter.

Mother put a record on the gramophone, and she and Captain John Black had a dance. She was wearing the same perfume, he remembered, from the summer when she and Dad had been killed in the train accident. She was very real in his arms as they danced lightly to the music.

"I'll wake in the morning," said the captain. "And I'll be in my rocket in space, and all this will be gone."

"No, no, don't think that," she cried, softly, pleadingly. "We're here. Don't question. God is good to us. Let's be happy."

The record ended with a circular hissing.

"You're tired, son," said Dad. He waved his pipe. "You and Ed go on upstairs. Your old bedroom is waiting for you."

"The old one?"

"The brass bed and all," laughed Edward.

"But I should report my men in."

"Why?" Mother was logical.

"Why? Well, I don't know. No reason, I suppose. No, none at all. What's the difference?" He shook his head. "I'm not being very logical these days."

"Good night, son." She kissed his cheek.

"Night, Mother."

"Sleep tight, son." Dad shook his hand.

"You, too," he said.

"It's good to have you home."

"It's good to *be* home."

He left the land of cigar smoke and perfume and books and gentle light and climbed the stairs, talking, talking with Edward. Edward pushed a door open, and there was the yellow brass bed and the old shields from their schooldays, and a very musty tweed coat which he regarded with strange, muted affection.

"It's too much," he said faintly. "Like being in a thunder shower without an umbrella. I'm soaked to the skin with emotion. I'm numb. I'm tired."

"A night's sleep between cool clean sheets for you, my lad." Edward slapped wide the snowy linen and flounced

the pillows. Then he put up a window and let the night blooming jasmine float in. There was moonlight and the sound of distant dancing and whispering.

"So this is Mars," said the captain, undressing.

"So this is Mars." Edward undressed in idle, leisurely moves, drawing his shirt off over his head, revealing bronzed shoulders and the good muscular neck.

The lights were out; they were in bed, side by side, as in the days, how many decades ago? The captain lolled and was nourished by the night wind pushing the lace curtains out upon the dark room air. Among the trees, upon a lawn, someone had cranked up a portable gramophone, and now it was playing softly: "*I'll be loving you, always, with a love that's true, always.*"

The thought of Anna came to his mind. "Is Anna here?"

His brother, lying straight out in the moonlight from the window, waited, and then said: "Yes. She's out of town. But she'll be here in the morning."

The captain shut his eyes. "I want to see Anna very much."

The room was square and quiet, except for their breathing. "Good night, Ed."

A pause. "Good night, John."

He lay peacefully, letting his thoughts float. For the first time the stress of the day was moved aside, all of the excitement was calmed. He could think logically now. It had all been emotion. The bands playing, the sight of familiar faces, the sick pounding of your heart. But—now . . .

How? He thought. How was all this made? And why? For what purpose? Out of the goodness of some kind God? Was God, then, really so fine and thoughtful of His children? How and why and what for?

He thought of the various theories advanced in the first heat of the afternoon by Hinkston and Petersen. He let all kinds of new theories drop in lazy pebbles down through his mind, as through a dark water, now turning, throwing out

dull flashes of white light. Mars. Earth. Mother. Dad. Edward. Mars. Martians.

Who had lived here a thousand years ago on Mars? Martians? Or had this always been like this? Martians. He repeated the word quietly, inwardly.

He laughed out loud, almost. He had the most ridiculous theory, all of a sudden. It gave him a kind of chilled feeling. It was really nothing to think of, of course. Highly improbable. Silly. Forget it. Ridiculous.

But, he thought, just suppose. Just *suppose* now, that there were Martians living on Mars and they saw our ship coming and saw us inside our ship and hated us. Suppose, now, just for the hell of it, that they wanted to destroy us, as invaders, as unwanted ones, and they wanted to do it in a very clever way, so that we would be taken off guard. Well, what would the best weapon be that a Martian could use against Earth-men with atom weapons?

Telepathy, perhaps; hypnosis, memory and imagination.

Suppose all these houses weren't real at all, this bed not real, but only figments of my own imagination, given substance by telepathy and hypnosis by the Martians.

Suppose these houses are really some other shape, a Martian shape, but, by playing on my desires and wants, these Martians have made this seem like my old home town, my old house, to lull me out of my suspicions? What better way to fool a man than by his own emotions?

And suppose those two people in the next room, asleep, are not my mother and father at all. But two Martians, incredibly brilliant, with the ability to keep me under this dreaming hypnosis all of the time?

And that brass band today? What a clever plan it would be. First, fool Petersen, then fool Hinkston, then gather a crowd round the rocket ship and wave. And all the men in the ship, seeing mothers, aunts, uncles, sweethearts, dead ten, twenty years ago, naturally, disregarding orders, would rush out and abandon the ship.

What more natural? What more unsuspecting? What more simple? A man doesn't ask too many questions when his mother is suddenly brought back to life; he's much too happy. And the brass band played and everybody was taken off to private homes. And here we all are, tonight, in various houses, in various beds, with no weapons to protect us, and the rocket lies in the moonlight, empty. And wouldn't it be horrible and terrifying to discover that all of this was part of some great clever plan by the Martians to divide and conquer us, and kill us?

Some time during the night, perhaps, my brother here on this bed, will change form, melt, shift, and become a one-eyed, green and yellow-toothed Martian. It would be very simple for him just to turn over in bed and put a knife into my heart. And in all those other houses down the street a dozen other brothers or fathers suddenly melting away and taking out knives and doing things to the unsuspecting, sleeping men of Earth.

His hands were shaking under the covers. His body was cold. Suddenly it was not a theory. Suddenly he was very afraid. He lifted himself in bed and listened. The night was very quiet. The music had stopped. The wind had died. His brother (?) lay sleeping beside him.

Very carefully he lifted the sheets, rolled them back. He slipped from bed and was walking softly across the room when his brother's voice said: "Where are you going?"

"What?"

His brother's voice was quite cold. "I said, where do you think you're going?"

"For a drink of water."

"But you're not thirsty."

"Yes, yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

Captain John Black broke and ran across the room. He screamed. He screamed twice.

He never reached the door.

In the morning, the brass band played a mournful dirge. From every house in the street came little solemn processions bearing long boxes, and along the sun-filled street, weeping and changing, came the grandmothers and grandfathers and mothers and sisters and brothers, walking to the churchyard, where there were open holes dug freshly and new tombstones installed.

Seventeen holes in all, and seventeen tombstones. Three of the tombstones said: CAPTAIN JOHN BLACK, ALBERT PETERSEN, and SAMUEL HINKSTON.

The mayor made a little sad speech, his face sometimes looking like the mayor, sometimes looking like something else.

Mother and Father Black were there, with Brother Edward, and they cried, their faces melting now from a familiar face into something else.

Grandpa and Grandma Petersen were there, weeping, their faces also shifting like wax, shivering as a thing does in waves of heat on a summer day.

The coffins were lowered. Somebody murmured about "the unexpected and sudden deaths of seventeen fine men during the night—"

Earth was shovelled in on the coffin tops.

After the funeral the brass band slammed and banged back into town and the crowd stood around and waved and shouted as the rocket was torn to pieces and strewn about and blown up.

THE END

### FANTASY CALENDAR

A pleasing calendar for 1953 can be obtained from Alan Hunter, 124, Belle Vue Road, Southbourne, Bournemouth (U.S.A.—Philip J. Rasch, 567, Erskine Drive, Pacific Palisades, California), at a cost of 2/6 (35 cents). It has two months to a page, below six good fantasy drawings by Staff Wright, Peter Ridley, Alan Hunter, Gerard Quinn, Joe Bowman and Bob Shaw. The whole is nicely bound and ready for hanging.

# American Commentary

by Forrest J. Ackerman

By virtue of the power invested in me by Hugo Gernsback (see *ASFm* No. 21), founder of modern science fiction, I have become the stf-father of the world's favourite fan—your own Walter Willis! This historic occasion happened in the Ackermansion, when Wally was guesting with Wendayne (Mrs. FJA) and myself, and Hugo Gernsback visited us, inscribing for me the cover of his No. 1 issue of *Amazing Stories* (April, 1926). At that time Mr. Gernsback gave me a new title: "Father of Science Fiction Fans." (All stf-sons will kindly remember their daddy's birthday with appropriate gifts. Let's see: I need a time-machine, and I've never had a trip to Mars yet . . . or how about sending me Bill Temple as a guest?)

The fabulous 10th Anniversary Science Fiction Convention in Chicago was such a success that this entire issue of *ASFm* could probably be devoted to describing it. Can you imagine over a thousand fans concentrated in one spot for three days, rubbing elbows with "Skylark" Smith, L. Sprague de Camp, Clifford Simak, Jack Williamson, Judith Merril, Fritz Leiber and dozens of other celebrities, asking questions of their favourite editors, seeing T.V. pictures adapted from magazine stories, buying

beautiful original artwork at auctions, listening to lectures and debates by Willy Ley, Geo. O. Smith, a Nobel Prizewinner, Kohn Campbell, Junior, and others, on subjects scientific fictional and scientifictional, being musically and otherwise entertained by Theodore Sturgeon, Bob Tucker, Evelyn (Galaxy) Gold, participating in a midnight masquerade of spacemen, bug-eyed monsters, Frankensteins, robots and beauties from Venus!

Chad Oliver was recently married, with Rog. Phillips as best man. (Chad wrote *Blood's a Rover*, to which Rog. is preparing an independent sequel *Rover's a Bloodhound*.) After the ceremony, Wendy and I hosted Chad and his bride in our home, where they were toasted with champagne by such well-wishers as A. E. van Vogt, Ray Bradbury, Mari Wolf and 17 others.

I talked on the phone the other day to John Collier, winner of the English-axised 1952 International Fantasy Award, and he told me that he's working on three of his stories for a "Trio" type film. Up at Curt Siodmak's Hollywood home I was shown film-strips from his science-fiction picture now in the editing stage, *Crack of Doom*.

By the way, when Hugo Gernsback was looking at my collection of 10,000 magazines, he came across (naturally) *Authentic Science Fiction*. "I like that title—Authentic," he said, as he has always stood for genuine scientific fiction.

46J.

# s-f handbook

## *terms of interest to the science fictioneer*

**Occultation**—A heavenly body is occulted when another such body passes across its image. Eclipses are such.

**Ohm**—Unit of electrical resistance using energy at the rate of one watt for each ampere of current flowing.

**Ontogeny**—Developmental (embryological) sequence of an organism.

**Open Cluster**—Collection of stars—such as the Pleiades—forming a fairly compact mass outside the Milky Way.

**Opposition**—A heavenly body, viewed from Earth, is in opposition when it lies in a direction opposite to that of the Sun. Antonym, conjunction.

**Orbit**—The path transcribed by an electron round a nucleus, or a planet round a star, or a satellite round a primary. Also means an eye-socket.

**Parabola**—Curve formed by making a cut through a cone parallel to the side of the cone. Every point on the curve is equidistant from a *focus* and a *directrix*.

**Parallax**—Change in apparent position of an object due to a change in the position of the observer.

**Parsec**—Distance represented by a parallax of one second of arc.  $19 \times 10^{12}$  miles, or 3.3 light years.

**Pentode**—A thermionic valve with anode and cathode, and two grids, the suppressor grid and the screen grid.

**Perigee**—The point on a planet's orbit at which it is nearest Earth.

**Perihelion**—Point on a planet's orbit at which it is nearest the Sun.

**Perpetual motion**—Object of perpetual search by pseudo-scientists, looking for a machine that will work for ever without added energy.

**pH**—A measure of alkalinity and acidity expressed as a concentration of hydrogen ions.

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## MAKE A DATE—

with us, same time, same place, next month. For your enjoyment we will have a sparkling novel by *S. J. Byrne* called "Lady of Flame," *R. M. Rhodes'* brilliant short story "Dangerous Power," and an amusing little story by *Forrest Ackerman* called "What an Idea!" And another prominent science-fiction personality will have something to say in the Guest Article.

**AUTHENTIC**—A MONTHLY "MUST!"

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

*writes*

*The Fourth Instalment  
of*

# FRONTIER LEGION

*Illustrated by DAVIS*

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*The story so far:*

Jan Arrowsmith wakes on the space-ship Goliath, suffering from loss of memory. He learns from Commandant Raymond that the fate of Earth depends on him; Lydia, Arrowsmith's wife, tells him that he left her when she bore his daughter. On Pluto, Arrowsmith is accused of murder and with being an impostor; hunted by Frontier Legion, he is sheltered by Hamish, a miner. Dr. Grant informs Arrowsmith that his memory may never return.

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## The Glory Road

NERVOUS shock gripped Jan Arrowsmith. He stood rigid, alarm bells ringing in his brain, vision blurred. The room seemed to recede, the walls waver. The doctor's words echoed through a dull haze, repeated over and over, like a needle stuck in the groove of a recording.

*Your memory may never return at all! Your memory may never—*

He heard his own voice, distorted, shouting:

"You must help me, doctor. I must remember—I alone can save Earth. It's vital that I remember everything . . ."

Someone slapped his face. Hard. The sharp, stinging

pain jolted him back to normality. He stopped shouting, and repeated, quietly :

" You must help me, doctor."

The room was suddenly hushed, the air still and tense. Hamish was uneasy, pushing back greying hair with a rough hand; he was a burly man with a simple nature, a little worried now and the worry showing in the lines of his face.

" Don't shout like that," he said. " If the legionnaires hear you, we'll all be shot."

Lydia pushed a chair towards Arrowsmith. It had been she who slapped him; now, she spoke sharply :

" You'd better sit down, Jan. Take hold of yourself."

She was years younger than Arrowsmith, beautiful, with raven-black hair falling about her shoulders. The coat she wore over a negligee hugged her lithe, curving form; her long, slim legs were bare and suntanned.

Dr. Grant said : " My fault—I should have broken it more gently." He poured something into a glass. " Here, drink this."

Arrowsmith sat down, limp and exhausted. He drank the liquid, felt it course fierily through his veins; the lethargy of shock left him. The doctor took his pulse again, and asked :

" Why is it so important for you to regain your memory?"

Arrowsmith looked at him. Dr. Grant was short and stocky, dressed in clothes of a severe style; his eyes were grey and very sharp, and his beard was dark and clipped to a point.

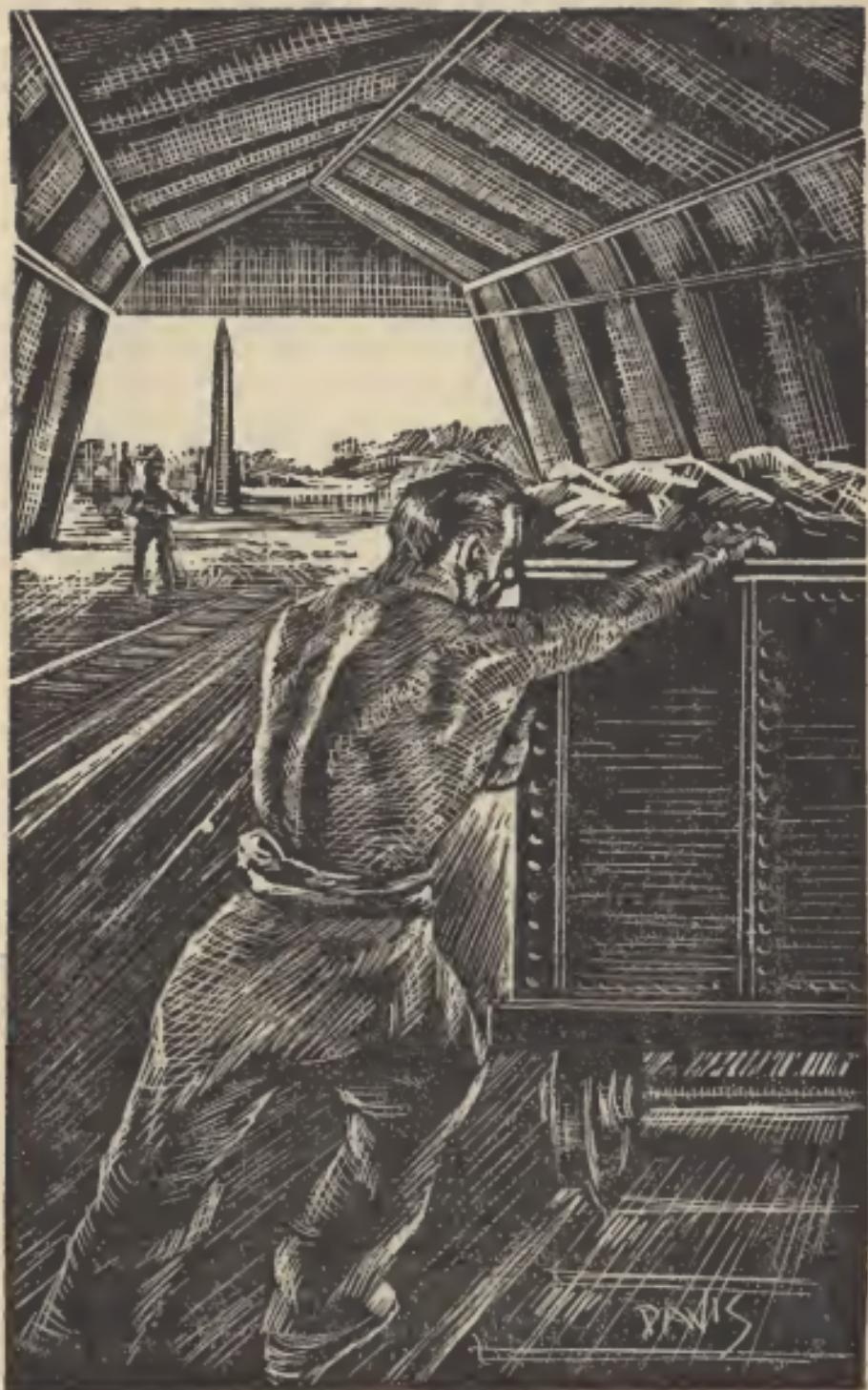
Arrowsmith spoke rapidly.

" I am a Security Agent, working directly for Neilson, Prime Minister of Terra. There is a threat to Earth, some disaster which will occur on the twenty-second of March—a week from now."

" Six days," Lydia interrupted softly. " Only six days!"

Arrowsmith continued : " The point is that I alone knew the danger—no one else had an inkling of it. I must have had some plan—I must have come to Pluto for a definite reason. *But I can't remember . . .*"

" The twenty-second," Dr. Grant said. " That's the date for the federation. I wonder if there's some connection?"



Arrowsmith turned to his wife.

"I can't wait any longer in the dark. We must take the chance of enemy spy-rays—tell me all you know, what Neilson told you. And about the federation. Remember, I know nothing—absolutely nothing."

Lydia sat down, her pert face fixed in concentration. Her dark eyes were unveiled now, revealing anxiety.

"The trouble is I know so little. Neilson himself didn't know—he said you were the only man who had all the details. He left the matter entirely in your hands. Jan, please, you *must* remember—it's terribly important!"

Arrowsmith shook his head.

"My memory is blank. Perhaps, if you tell me everything you know, perhaps then, something will come back. Try it."

Lydia began, carefully selecting the words she used.

"For a century, ever since Earth started colonizing the planets of the solar system, there has been friction between the colonists and the central government on Earth. This was probably inevitable, as the type of people essential for pioneering a new world must be strong-willed and energetic, full of ideas and prepared to work hard—believing in themselves and the right to run things their own way. The Terran Government, on the other hand, has shown itself to be conservative and hide-bound, clinging obstinately to tradition and wanting to keep the colonists under its thumb—satellites to pay taxes and take orders without questioning its authority."

She paused for breath, then went on :

"This has been going on for the last century; bickering between the armchair rulers on Earth—who have not the slightest idea of actual conditions on the planets—and the pioneers who have had the most appalling difficulties to overcome, and did not take kindly to the reams of red tape which the Terran government tried to impose on them. And matters were not made easier by Frontier Legion . . ."

Arrowsmith knew what she meant. He had already tasted the brutality of Raymond's force and had learnt from experience the sort of men who wore the grey uniform of

the Legion. Criminals, anti-social misfits, mercenaries, men who enjoyed killing and were content to remain hired thugs.

" . . . Frontier Legion, under Commandant Raymond," Lydia said, "had the job of opening up the planets for the colonists. Which entailed ruthlessly destroying any opposition on the part of the inhabitants—including suppressing rebel factions amongst the colonists from Earth. Raymond's men have made themselves thoroughly hated by the descendants of the original pioneers—hated and feared, for Frontier Legion has absolute control on the colonies."

" Including Pluto!" Hamish said harshly.

Dr. Grant nodded agreement. "Including Pluto," he echoed.

Lydia continued: "But Neilson is more enlightened than past Prime Ministers. For the past twenty years, since he entered office, he has been pressing for a federation of the colonies—a federation in which each world would be self-governing, yet still look to the mother planet for leadership. At last, he has overcome political opposition and an agreement is about to be signed between Earth, Mars and Venus."

" On the twenty-second of March?" Arrowsmith asked.

" Yes. The colonies on the two inner planets are by far the largest and most important. If this plan succeeds, the outer planets will join in due course. If the federation fails, it may lead to open war between Earth and her colonies—the most tragic thing that could happen to our civilisation." She took a deep breath. " And now, at this critical moment, comes a major threat to Earth itself. Neilson has received reports of a plot to destroy the Moon! This is your job, Jan, the thing you must stop at all costs . . ."

Arrowsmith felt the shock hit him like a tidal wave. *Destroy the Moon!* It was fantastic—how could such a thing possibly be done? And by whom? And how was he to stop it? Sweat started from his forehead . . . if it were possible? Earth, a mere quarter of a million miles away, would receive the full blast of the explosion. Imagining such a catastrophe, he shuddered.

Lydia said: "Rumours of this plot reached Neilson, and he put you in complete charge. I gather there were hints that

suggested the danger came from outer space, centred about Pluto—that's why you came here in *Goliath*."

The room was hushed except for Lydia Arrowsmith's voice; all three men listened, tense, expectant.

"The élite of the three governments are meeting, the twenty-second of March, to settle their differences and sign the declaration of federation—*on Earth's moon!*" The girl waited for the implication of this to sink in. "At one blow, the system's three major planets will be thrown into anarchy, leaderless, at the moment the enemy strike. Our civilization will be powerless to save itself. No effective struggle will be possible. Control of the solar system will inevitably pass to the enemy."

The pin-prick of fear stabbed at Arrowsmith. The plan was fabulous, incredible—but suppose the enemy did have a weapon which could destroy the moon? He saw only too clearly that the results his wife pictured must follow. The whole thing was so devilish, so simple . . .

He asked, abruptly: "Surely Neilson will cancel the meeting in view of this threat?"

His wife shook her head.

"No. The plans for the federation are too far advanced for that. Neilson is determined to go ahead, despite the danger. This is the first time there has been the chance of uniting the colonies—and it may be the last. There is the spirit of peace and plenty in the air, and the Prime Minister is confident that you will beat the plotters and safeguard Earth and the federation."

Arrowsmith laughed bitterly. *So Neilson had confidence in him!* The irony of it was that he felt he might have justified the Prime Minister's confidence—if only he hadn't lost his memory! He stared round the tiny room, the bare walls, the solitary table, the mat on the floor covering the trapdoor to the hole where he had hidden while the legionnaires searched for him. Because he couldn't remember his security number, he was hunted by Raymond and the men of Frontier Legion—the very force he was supposed to command in the

fight to save Earth.

Why had he come to Pluto at all? What clue had brought him to the system's outermost planet? Raymond had hinted that it was at his own instigation he descended to the Deeps—the underground caverns of Pluto—to meet the aliens who lived there. But surely those strange creatures, devoid of any known sensory organs, could not constitute a menace to Earth?

Dr. Grant broke the silence.

"Everything seems to revolve around your lost memory. What is your earliest recollection?"

"Waking aboard the *Goliath*," Arrowsmith replied. "I felt weak, saw things through a mist. And Raymond's voice asking if I were dead! The doctor said I was suffering from the effects of high-acceleration flight. Before that is a complete blank."

Dr. Grant stroked his beard.

"Hmm. And this doctor was killed before you could question him? That sounds very convenient for somebody—especially as you've been injected with a rare Venusian drug which has the effect of blotting out the memory. Probably you were doped aboard the *Goliath*."

"I don't see how—" Arrowsmith began, and stopped. He found he could not visualise the scene aboard Raymond's flagship before he woke to the nightmare experience of not-remembering.

Lydia said: "Can't you do anything, doctor? You see, now, how important it is that my husband remember his past."

Dr. Grant hesitated.

"There's no antidote to the drug," he said slowly, "but there is one possibility—hypnosis. It's dangerous, and—"

A loud mechanical voice interrupted:

"Special orders from Commandant Raymond. All colonists will aid in the search for Jan Arrowsmith. Anyone hiding, or helping this man, will be shot without trial. Arrowsmith is dangerous. He is an enemy spy, a murderer, and must be taken without delay. Watch for this man and report to the nearest Legion patrol."

Arrowsmith crossed to the window and peered out to the street. A run-about mounted with a loudspeaker was patrolling the area, broadcasting the message. He saw grey-clad legionnaires at either end of the street, blocking his escape; he did not doubt that the whole area was cordoned off and a search going on.

The message continued in a loud, brassy voice:

"Here is a description of Jan Arrowsmith. Thirty-five years of age, medium height, lean build. Thinning hair, large pale-blue eyes, thin lips, sharply pointed nose. Bony forehead, protruding cheekbones with muscles descending in a vee-line to a narrow, squarish chin. Last seen in the grey uniform of Frontier Legion, without epaulettes. He is armed."

Arrowsmith ran his fingers over his jaw. The description was too good; no one could possibly mistake him. He looked up at the vast transparent dome of Pluto's Colony—and felt trapped. How could he escape a second search? Beyond the dome, the planet's frozen atmosphere glittered on bare rocks—dark, cold void where no man could live without a space-suit.

The broadcast ended:

"Arrowsmith must be caught, dead or alive, and Commandant Raymond offers a reward of one thousand credits for information leading to his capture. It is the duty of every colonist to aid in the search for this spy. He must be caught. Repeat, he *must* be caught!"

Arrowsmith thought: *Damn Raymond—he's too efficient. If I hadn't forgotten my security number, this would never have happened. Of course, he thinks I'm an impostor, an enemy spy and—*

He whirled about, facing the doctor, and snapped:

"What were you saying about hypnosis?"

Dr. Grant's grey eyes were serious.

"I can't guarantee results, but possibly if I were to put you under hypnosis, I might be able to force my will onto yours, force your subconscious back to the past and make you re-live events before the drug took effect. It may not work at all—and it is a dangerous practice. *The experience*

*may drive you insane.* If it were not of such vital importance for you to remember, I would not even suggest such a course. It is for you to decide."

Arrowsmith said: "Get on with it!"

Lydia burst out: "Jan—no—I—" She checked herself. "I suppose we must take the risk, with the fate of Earth in the balance."

She moved towards him, slipped into his arms. Arrowsmith held her tightly, her perfume exciting him; she was warm and soft and lovely. He bent his head and kissed the generous red lips she offered, his blood racing . . .

She murmured: "I love you, Jan, I love you—remember that, always, no matter what happens. I love you."

She clung to him, and Arrowsmith kissed her again, long and hard; then Dr. Grant's voice broke in:

"I'm ready. We'd better start at once—before the search parties double back here."

Lydia moved away from him, said: "I'll be waiting, Jan."

The doctor had prepared a hypodermic. He bared Arrowsmith's arm and swabbed the skin; the needle pricked and the liquid pumped in.

"Nothing to worry about," Dr. Grant explained. "I'm using a perfectly harmless drug, one that will lessen your resistance and allow me to put you to sleep more quickly. We haven't much time. Speed is essential."

Arrowsmith relaxed in a chair, drowsy. Dr. Grant sat opposite him with a gleaming metal rod suspended between two brackets; he pushed the rod and it swung lazily backwards and forwards.

"Watch the rod," the doctor said. "Concentrate on it."

Arrowsmith's vision blurred. The glittering rod ticked from side to side . . . to and fro . . . back and forth. It had a hypnotic, compelling rhythm, and the doctor's voice came, dreamily:

"Sleep—sleep—you are tired—very tired—falling asleep . . ."

Arrowsmith's head felt heavy as lead, too heavy to lift; his chin dropped, touched his chest; his eyes closed. A voice crept between the folds of velvet darkness about him, probing, questioning—

"You are going back in time—back—back. Remember the *Goliath*. You are at the space-port, on Earth, about to embark for Pluto. Commandant Raymond is with you. The *Goliath*. Earth—Pluto. Remember . . . remember . . . remember . . ."

*This is silly*, Arrowsmith thought lazily, *I can't remember*. They know I can't remember. There's a barrier, like a wall reaching to infinity, a terrible wall I can't pass. The wall frightens me, it's so high, higher than the sky, and it stretches further than any horizon.

"You are aboard the *Goliath*, with Commandant Raymond," said the insistent voice behind the velvet curtain. "Describe what is happening. Tell me what you see. What do you see?"

Arrowsmith mumbled: "A wall, a high wall all round me."

He thought: *Silly to expect me to remember anything. They know I've lost my memory*. Why should he try to remember? He didn't want to remember—he wanted to forget. There was the wall—only the wall, a barrier to the past.

"You're in space, bound for Pluto," came the irritating voice, the voice not even the wall could stop. "You're on the flagship *Goliath*, with Commandant Raymond. Tell me what is happening to you. Do you remember a man in a white coat? The doctor . . ."

But there was only the wall. And Lydia. He remembered Lydia, his wife—she was going to have a baby, and he'd left her. How angry she'd been! She was even lovelier when she was angry, but he didn't like the things she said. She didn't seem to realise how important he was—and he didn't want the child. Children irritated him—he was important, not the child Lydia would have. Why couldn't she see that? He was far more important . . .

"The *Goliath* is moving steadily towards Pluto," whispered

the voice. "You and Raymond are aboard. Describe what is going on around you. Describe—"

*I am the most important man in the world*, Arrowsmith thought. The most important man in the solar system. I alone can save Earth. I—I—I! What a beautiful sound the word had, more beautiful even than Lydia. The sound went round in his head. I—I—I . . .

"Remember?" persisted the voice beyond the curtain. "Remember back to the past. Try again. You are on Earth, boarding the space-ship for Pluto—"

Lydia had called him an egotist. He didn't like Lydia. The most beautiful sound in the world. I—I—I . . . The wall was still there, so high it curved overhead, seemed to fall back on him; so wide it stretched right round him, a pair of jaws, closing in, threatening him. The wall blocking out the past.

Suddenly, the wall opened. Before him, he saw a face like a round moon, mostly in shadow, with a crescent of light hitting the top of a bald head. *Moon-face!* Jan Arrowsmith began to scream . . .

Commandant Raymond sat in his office at the headquarters of Frontier Legion on Pluto. He sat at an ornate desk with a thick pile covering his feet. He was a round, fat man, with a round, bald head squat on sloping shoulders, and his eyes were close-set with a hard, penetrating stare. He stared through the window to the deserted square where hung the grey, silver and black flag of the Legion. He stared at the flag and scowled.

Someone knocked on the door.

Raymond snapped, testily: "Come in."

The door opened and a slim, dapper man entered.

Raymond said: "Bauer. Any news yet?"

Bauer shrugged slim shoulders. He wore the grey Legion uniform, with epaulettes ranking him below the Commandant; his face was sallow and unpleasant, his deep, brooding eyes cold and filled with the urge to kill. Bauer had been born

with the desire to kill and the aura of death seemed to spread out from him.

He spoke, in a jerky monotone calculated to suppress any show of emotion.

"He must be hiding. Miners helping him obviously. I'll get him. Just give me time."

Raymond clenched soft white hands and thumped the desk.

"You've had time enough. Make reprisals. Take half a dozen colonists and shoot them in the square. They'll come to heel fast enough."

Bauer's eyes glittered. "Enjoy that. Leave it to me."

Raymond nodded, and licked his lips with a small, pink tongue.

"I must return to Earth at once," he said. "The twenty-second is approaching and I must see Neilson. I shall take the *Goliath* and leave you here in charge. You know what to do?"

Bauer's right hand closed about the butt of his needle-gun. His thin lips formed a sneer.

"Yes. Find Arrowsmith. Take care of him."

"Good. And see there is no mistake—you must not fail. Too much hangs in the balance."

Commandant Raymond rose to his feet and moved for the door. His body had a grotesque roll as he moved. He paused in the doorway, looking back at his lieutenant; he said :

"I am leaving now. When you have finished here, follow me to Earth—I shall have need of you on the twenty-second."

Bauer asked : "The girl. Lydia. What of her?"

Raymond shrugged carelessly.

"Do anything you like about her. She's not important. Arrowsmith is our man."

The lines about Bauer's mouth relaxed in a grimace intended for a smile.

"It will be a pleasure to take care of *her* . . ."

Raymond went through the door, heading for the *Goliath*. His flabby voice floated back : "Jan Arrowsmith must die!"

He felt weak. A dark cloud seemed to obscure the room.

Voices came faintly. Someone shook him. There was a perfume, a woman's perfume, and a cool hand stroking his face. Arrowsmith blinked open his eyes, returning to consciousness.

He looked up, into the smooth oval of his wife's face. She was no longer wearing the pert expression, but appeared worried. The veil had dropped from her eyes, wide, dark pools revealing her innermost feelings. Her lips parted :

"Jan—Jan, darling, are you all right?"

He sat up, wondering what had happened. It took him several seconds to fit himself into the room, to identify Hamish and Dr. Grant. Then he remembered—hypnosis! He stood up, a little unsteadily.

"Did you get anything, doctor? Did I remember?"

Dr. Grant shook his head, breath sighing noisily.

"Nothing," he replied. "I was unable to pierce the barrier to your memory. *The experiment was a failure.* There's nothing more I can do for you."

Lydia said, pleadingly : "Try to remember, Jan. Try hard. Perhaps something will come now."

Arrowsmith closed his eyes, digging back to the past. The *Goliath*. Raymond, his secret mission, the *Deeps*. He could remember nothing previous—his memory cells were still completely blank. He opened his eyes again, and said :

"No good, I'm afraid. Any use your trying again, doctor?"

Grant fingered his beard, grey eyes sombre.

"I daren't risk it a second time—you nearly didn't come out of hypnosis then. You began to go back, saw something terrifying, and started to scream. I had to dope you. If I'd carried on, you would have gone insane."

The doctor packed his equipment into a black, plastic carrier.

"There's just one chance," he added. "A trigger word. It's quite possible you heard a chance word or phrase, at the time you had this Venusian forgetfulness drug administered—and if you should hear that trigger word again, it might bring back your memory. Might, I say. But what that word or phrase could be . . ." He spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "Who can say?"

Hamish stepped forward, restless.

"Do you feel fit enough to leave, Arrowsmith? It's dangerous to keep you here any longer—and I've made arrangements for you to leave Pluto."

"Leave Pluto?" Arrowsmith echoed. "How?"

The miner's rough face eased in a smile.

"The usual way we smuggle victims of Frontier Legion off the planet—by the Glory Road!"

Dr. Grant explained: "The Glory Road is the name we have given to our secret escape route, the way to freedom. You see, you're not the first person to fall foul of the Legion, not by a score or more. And the miners have built up an organisation to help those in trouble."

Hamish doubled his hands into fists. He said:

"We colonists have no love for the Legion. Our secret organisation is ready to fight back on any front. All the outer planets are in it; Pluto, Neptune and Uranus—the peoples of Saturn and Jupiter feel the way we do, but they may come under the federation, so they're sitting on the fence."

Listening to the burly, grey-haired miner, Arrowsmith wondered what Raymond would have said if he had overheard the conversation. Hamish went on, with simple directness:

"When Mars and Venus join the federation, the power of Frontier Legion will be broken on the inner planets, and that means Raymond's force will concentrate on us, beyond the asteroid belt. We don't like that idea—and have formed an underground movement to fight back. The Glory Road is only part of our organisation, but a useful part."

Lydia asked: "But where do you smuggle your people to? Surely the Legion has the upper hand everywhere?"

"To Mars—or Venus!" It was Dr. Grant who answered her. "The colonies there are larger and it is therefore easier for a wanted man to lose himself. Besides, complete freedom will come for the victims of Frontier Legion when the federation is formed."

Hamish said: "It takes time of course, and we do the trip

in stages—easy enough on our slow-moving rocket-ships. The Legion patrols rarely take notice of the ships carrying ore to other colonies, and we move our men from Pluto to Neptune, then to Uranus, and so on. There's a ship loading up with ore for Neptune right now—and there's a berth for you two."

Arrowsmith didn't know whether he wanted to leave Pluto—but it seemed he had little choice in the matter. If he didn't make use of the Glory Road, the Legion would search till they found him—and the result would be death . . .

"You'll have to change into these," Hamish said, handing Arrowsmith and Lydia a set each of rough miner's clothes. "The tricky part is getting you to the space-ship—it means going through the cordon."

Arrowsmith stripped off his grey uniform and dressed as a miner; Lydia went into the other room to change. When they had finished, Hamish surveyed them with satisfaction.

"You'll do. Here, smear this over your hands and faces."

He gave them a box containing a mixture of grease and grey rock dust.

"The idea is," he explained, "that you've just come from the mines and are going to help load the ore. With luck, no one will stop us."

Arrowsmith applied the dirty mixture to his face and hands. He looked at his wife, hardly recognising her. Yes, they might pass as miners—if the legionnaires didn't look too closely. He thrust his needle-gun inside the front of his jacket.

Dr. Grant said: "I'll leave you now. The rest is up to Hamish. Good luck."

Hamish led the way, leaving by a back door. The three of them crossed an alleyway and moved into a store shed where ore was being loaded onto trolleys. There were a dozen or more miners at work, and Legion sentries on the gate. Arrowsmith helped load the first trolley and started out with it through the gates for the space-port.

The sentries looked them over but made no move to interfere. Arrowsmith breathed his relief; the first step along the

Glory Road had been safely taken. The trolley was heavily laden and moved slowly. Lydia was beside him, Hamish just behind. They crossed an open square, where a chain of legionnaires were strung out in single line. Another check.

The miner's foreman called : "Load of ore for Neptune."

The trolley stopped, waiting for clearance. In the distance, far across the open ground beneath the dome, Arrowsmith could see the spaceship. The leader of the road patrol looked them over.

"All right," he said. "Carry on."

But before the trolley could restart, a run-about swung across the square, coming to a standstill a few yards away. A slim man with a sallow face jumped out.

Lydia hissed : "Bauer! If he recognises us . . ."

Raymond's lieutenant never even looked at them. He addressed the leader of the patrol :

"Arrowsmith? No one's come forward? Still hiding him?"

"No sign of him. He's hiding somewhere."

Bauer's thin lips drew back, showing his teeth; a cold light flamed in his deep-set eyes. He snarled :

"Right! Teach these colonists a lesson. Teach them to co-operate. Reprisals. Shoot six men every hour until they surrender Arrowsmith. Start now. *Start with this crew!*"

The miners grouped about Arrowsmith shifted uneasily. One man turned pale. Hamish said :

"We haven't a chance."

Arrowsmith looked at Lydia. She smiled back, a ghost of a smile.

"This is the end," she whispered. "At least we're together—I'm glad of that."

Bauer drew his gun, said :

"Line them up. Patrol-leader—I'll take charge. When I drop my hand . . . *open fire!*"

(Continued Next Month)

(Continued from page 29.)

George looked at the tank again, and noted the big green triangle painted on it. Sometime, he thought, if he lived, he might be able to fit the pieces of this puzzle together. The white circles fought the strange Terrestrials, then suddenly turned to defend them against the green triangles. Why? What was the fighting about, anyway? And who were the combatants? Did it go on like this all of the time all over Venus, or had they happened to drop into the middle of a local war?

Suddenly, as if obeying a single voice, all the small attacking tanks wheeled round simultaneously and clattered swiftly back in the direction from which they'd come, leaving behind them only dust trails and the dozen or so of their number which had been knocked out.

The firing ceased abruptly.

The skipper said: "We've beaten them off."

"We?" echoed George. "Who are 'we'?"

The skipper shrugged, and peered into the distances after the fleeing tanks. He became suddenly rigid. "Uh-uh. Telescope, George."

George passed it.

"There's no end to it," the Captain said, presently. "Unless this is the end coming. It looks like it."

George was straining his eyes to see what the Captain could see. He could only make out, somewhere near the blurred horizon, it seemed, a dark, moving spot.

"What is it?"

"It's the grandfather of all tanks. About five times the size of our friends here. Lord, it must be all of twenty feet tall and weigh around three hundred tons. Coming this way. Rather slow. Looks grim. Seems to be alone."

"Coming to our rescue? Maybe that's what frightened the triangle corps off."

"I'd like to think so, but I'm afraid not. Our late attackers are dashing towards it like kids running to their mother. It's

not firing at them. Gosh, it reminds me of a big, fat, female spider and her brood. They're forming up behind her now—hanging on her apron-strings, as it were . . . . It's no use, George. It's carrying their sign: a green triangle. We're in for it this time. Got any aspirin on you?"

He relinquished the telescope to George with a slight smile. George looked at him curiously.

"You're perking up again, Skip. I thought you'd given up."

"I had, George, and I have again—now I've seen what's coming. The first time I felt that everyone and everything was against us. But when the lads in the H.Q. over there started carrying a gun for us, I felt a whole lot better. It's nice to have someone on your side, and you must admit they've put up a good show."

"I see," said George. The Captain hated being out on his own, bearing the whole responsibility when he was helpless to do anything about it. He was still helpless, but not alone: the unknown commander of the wheeled thing had taken over their defence. He had an ally on his own level. He seemed to have forgotten that two of his crew had been killed by the white circle tanks. Or else he looked upon it as a mistake.

Sparks and the mate still crouched silently at the bottom of the pit. They looked dazed from the shelling. They winced as a boom sounded from the distance, and went flat as the shriek of an approaching shell split the air. It came down with a great rushing sound some three hundred yards behind the hull of the space-ship, and with a tremendous crack a gusher of brown earth shot towards the lowering sky. Black smoke boiled up from its base.

Here we go again, thought George, and felt depressed. He let himself slide slowly back into the crater. The skipper remained up there.

The white circle tanks began firing, their guns cocked at extreme elevation. The skipper observed through the telescope.

"Our shells are falling short," he called down. "We can't

reach him. He's stopped well out of range. He's going to shoot us up from there."

Another shell came wailing, then tearing down. Crack! Still plus, but a hundred yards nearer.

The radio-operator looked at George over his handkerchief. His scared eyes said what George was thinking: only a matter of time now, and not much of it.

Then they jumped as the rockets of the cigar on wheels roared suddenly. They felt the vibration of the ship's weight moving off, and they all—even the mate—scrambled up to see whether it was abandoning them, rushing off to a safe place out of range.

But, its vents screaming, its wheels racing, it was shooting like an arrow towards the dim bulk of the giant tank.

George felt an odd lump arise in his throat. Our champion, he thought. Mad, useless courage. This tank was far too big and solid to be overthrown, as the midget tank had been, merely by the H.Q.'s weight. The H.Q. could only smash itself to pieces as a boat splinters itself on a rock. Perhaps it only intended to worry the tank, spoil its aim, dart around it like a dog around a bear, using its superior speed to preserve itself.

Using unsuspected small quick-firing guns, the tank opened up on the thing rocketing towards it. The crackling fire had no visible effect. The H.Q. drove through the jumping shell-bursts unchecked. Indeed, it increased its velocity, began to veer, then swerved back sharply at terrific speed.

They had a glimpse of its pointed nose catching the tank obliquely in the side, just under the turret. Then they saw no more for several minutes, because they were blinded by the flash of white light which seemed to rive both heaven and earth.

When they picked themselves up and began to receive visual impressions again, the thunderous echoes of the explosion were still repeating themselves around the horizon. They had to give Sparks immediate first-aid. His lower lip was just raw flesh now, like a burst tomato, and they had to gag him. He was moaning with the pain of it.

The giant tank stood out there in the middle distance, brewing up, with both tracks blown off and its turret lying in halves a quarter of a mile away. Its gun was broken off short as though it had been a stick of chalk. A jagged crack ran down its frontal plate. It looked like a black cauldron boiling merrily on a fire.

One wheel of the H.Q. had been blown back in their direction and lay, somehow pitifully, on the ground near the great steel wheel. It was the sole remaining fragment. The rest seemed to have been atomised.

A great many of the small tanks sheltering behind the big one were lying around in pieces. If any at all had survived, they had fled.

The guarding, white circle tanks had relapsed into silence and disinterestedness.

The skipper surveyed the battlefield. He was very moved. He said to George : "What great guys they were ! They must have known they were riding a cargo of dynamite. Fuel tanks burst, I guess."

George said : "Now I don't suppose we'll ever know who they were. Or even if there were any."

"Uh?"

"Well, we still don't know, do we?"

"I'll stake my life there were people in there who knew just what they were doing," said the Captain, stubbornly.

George didn't argue. For one thing, he'd no facts to go on. For another, it was obvious that the skipper had an emotional need to believe that there were Venusians on his side, faithful unto death, that the whole planet wasn't hostile. That belief had lifted him out of his despair, given him his faith back. What did it matter if the belief were right or wrong, so long as it sustained him ? He might very well be right, anyhow.

They inspected their space-ship inside and out. Things had been pretty badly shaken up, but the only thing beyond ultimate repair was the radio set. The fins were grotesquely crumpled, but could be straightened out on the portable work-

benches, given time. After that, the great problem would be to get the ship back standing vertically on its tail, the take-off position.

"If only we had winches," said the skipper.

The mate was feeling brighter now, and had an idea.

"Can't we do something with the tanks—use 'em, I mean?"

The Captain said: "I doubt it. I suspect they were directed and powered from the mobile H.Q., and now that's gone . . . Besides, we'd need cables."

"The old Terrestrial tanks carried cables for pulling each other out of awkward spots," said George. "Let's have a look at these things."

They found each tank had a cable locker at the rear, containing fifty yards or so of oiled steel cable an inch and a half thick.

They looked at each other. "It's like an answer to a prayer," said the skipper. "We can join the cables together. Then, if we can get only eight or nine of these tanks working somehow . . ."

George said: "You know, I've been wondering about the driving seats. It seems to argue that the things weren't always remote controlled, and perhaps still needn't be. I think there's alternative provision for manual control. That panel in front of the seat—it has manual switches on it. I'm going to try it. Keep clear of the tracks."

He climbed into the tank beside which they were standing.

None of the switches or levers was marked, and he began a game of trial and error with them. He caught himself by surprise and hit the forward movement lever at the first attempt. The tank jolted forward. It went quite a hundred yards before he found out how to stop it. But the controls were easy to manage once he'd mentally labelled everything. The video screen showed him where he was going. Twenty minutes later he was giving the skipper driving lessons.

When the skipper had mastered it, he brought the tank to a halt and said to George: "We've two weeks' work to do on the fins before they're strong enough to support the ship.

That's if the triangle crowd don't attack again and do more damage. But if we're left in peace, then there's the danger that these tanks might take it into their heads to wander off before we can use 'em, and leave us stranded. Wonder if we can switch off the remote controls in any way?"

They experimented, removing an antenna. But then the tank wouldn't move at all.

George said : " If you cut off the remote control, you also cut the tank off from its source of power. We'll have to take the risk that they'll stay here."

" I don't like taking risks," said the skipper. " Look, George, I'd like you to have a scout around in the helicopter. I know you want to explore, anyhow, but the main thing is to try to contact the white circle G.H.Q., whoever and wherever they are. Tell 'em we'd like their continued aid in defence, also their tanks for haulage. Maybe they can send mobile workshops to help with the repairing. They do seem to be on our side now. Tell 'em we only came to establish friendly contact with Venusians, anyhow, not to make enemies. Tell 'em how their H.Q. blew itself up in our defence. Thank them on our behalf. We don't understand why they're protecting us, but we're grateful, and all that. Will you do that?"

" Sure. I didn't aim to leave Venus without meeting the Venusians or having a look at the place. I'll leave right away."

It was easy to get the helicopter out. It had been packed carefully in pieces, and had suffered no damage. In the normal way it would have had to have been lowered piece by piece from the hatch at the top of the ship. But now that hatch was almost at ground level, and it was like unloading a railway box-car. The four of them assembled the helicopter, and adjusted the variable pitch vanes to cope with the heavier atmosphere. George nearly crashed on the first trial flight, but eventually they got the pitch right and the thing flew smoothly. George made a wide circuit of the area, but saw no sign of enemy tanks.

They packed concentrated food, and tested the Teleo com-

ponents. The Teleo was undoubtedly the foremost invention of the age, and had been produced for the Mar'ian expedition. The disappointment of that adventure had left its use limited. In war it would have been invaluable, keeping infantry patrols in silent communication. Half a century ago it could have been an interpreter. But now there was One World and one tongue.

Again, the Teleo suited only certain physical types. It produced excruciating headaches in others, among whom Captain Freiburg was one. It could have been useful in the management of the ship at times when speech was impossible, but Freiburg preferred to keep a clear head. Also, its range was limited to about three yards.

It looked simple enough: just a skull cap of thin, flexible and sensitized material, connected by a twin cable to a small box worn on a belt. The only control was a push-pull switch. Two or more people using the Teleo could communicate telepathically, even though they spoke different languages. A thought, at base, was a measurable electric discharge from the brain cells. The Teleo merely measured that discharge and transmitted it on a short wave. Or it could receive such an impulse: it was a two-way radio. The discharge was reproduced in the receiver's brain, became a thought which was interpreted in the recipient's language.

There was a mask screening unconscious or subconscious thoughts. Only deliberately formed conscious thoughts came through, and then only by the will of the sender, who could switch the apparatus on or off.

George had half a dozen sets packed in a satchel. As he said before they'd started: "If I meet any Venusians, I only hope they've heads to put these on."

When the helicop'er was loaded, he shook hands all round. The skipper warned: "Don't go anywhere near the ceiling. Remember, the clouds are poisonous. Look out for that white circle. Good luck, George."

Then George was humming about over their heads, gaining height, till the three faces below looked like white dots, then

became indistinguishable, while the space-ship shrank to a mere stick lying on the ground. Then the stick floated away behind and was swallowed by the misty distance. Ahead, the blur on the horizon began to resolve itself into mountains, white-peaked.

He flew on, and presently was passing between the silent, snow-powdered peaks and staring down into desolate, twisting valleys. And then, beyond, the plain resumed again, and went on and on. Visibility under that dull sky was very poor. In no direction was the horizon clear.

Over the plain he had to keep fairly close to the ground lest he should miss seeing any friendly vehicles. He once glimpsed a huge metal wheel, of the kind which had encircled them, bowling swiftly along on a secret errand and cutting its path as straight as a beeline. It was quite by itself on the vast plain but seemed confident of its mission. It was going roughly in his present direction, and he swooped down and tried to follow it. But from directly above its thinness made it all but invisible, and he lost it. Then he saw it a minute later spinning away on a divergent course, like a silver dollar, too far and fast for him to have a hope of catching it again.

That was the only moving thing he saw until a jet plane dropped out of the clouds and came screaming down at him. It shot past and banked widely, and in those moments he saw it clearly: a short, stubby thing, grey as the clouds, with swept-back wings. On each wing was painted a white circle.

His heart leaped. A friendly plane. Perhaps it would guide him to the G.H.Q. Perhaps it had come for that purpose.

He hadn't time to speculate more about that, for the plane zoomed through a great semi-circle and came straight for him, spitting cannon shells. There were a few seconds of noisy confusion. He lost control of the helicopter. It was taken from him and bounced about the sky like a rubber ball. And sometimes the green-brown plain became the sky and sometimes it became a great wall, standing up first on this side of him and then on that. There were smoke blotches

drifting past and fragments flying and ear-splitting bangs.

Whether he pressed the ejector switch voluntarily or not, he never knew. But suddenly he was flying through the air without the now unreliable aid of the helicopter. Then he was falling. His parachute opened automatically. Under its see-sawing canopy, he tried to regain control of his own rocking senses.

The helicopter, with its tail shot off, was side-slipping away and below him. Its brusque executioner had quite disappeared, presumably back into the clouds.

He watched the helicopter spin down and crash on the plain, and was angry and bewildered. Would he ever even begin to make sense of it?

He'd thought, like the skipper, that the white circle was now the symbol of an ally. Yet a white circle 'plane had just shot him down on sight.

A mistake? But surely they had radio, and the information had gone out to all local areas by now? If not, then White Circle G.H.Q. wasn't so hot, and its help could only be regarded as a doubtful quantity. Perhaps they'd changed sides again? Such vacillating characters could never be trusted.

He landed with a foot-tingling jar. It was just such a place as that where the space-ship had landed: the dirty green-brown plain spreading away into murkiness, and the shell or bomb craters pitting its drab surface. For all his long flight, he'd got nowhere much—only into a worse position. Here he was, many leagues from his fellows, alone and unarmed (his rifle was in the 'copter), with only his legs for transport. And, seemingly, he was between two fires: everyone's foe. Or prey.

He threw off the parachute harness, and began walking in the direction where he'd seen the helicopter crash. It was necessary to salvage the food, and perhaps the gun, but he was beginning to think there was little need to collect the Teleo outfits. Venusians, with or without heads, seemed to be people to avoid.

## CHAPTER THREE

MARA returned with a bundle of the succulent loogo stalks even before Dox had missed them from his well-guarded store. Swift as she'd been, it was already too late. Mother sat up in bed with her mouth open as if eager to be fed at once. But she'd never eat again. Her mouth was open this time merely because her jaw had dropped.

Mara looked at the fat, still body, shrugged and thought: Well, that servitude is ended. She fed well. None can say I failed in my duty.

Absently, she began nibbling one of the stalks herself. She felt no sorrow, only relief. She was free from the onus of feeding that insatiable appetite.

Now she wished to be free from Fami itself. It was a problem. The only known way to leave Fami was the way her mother (most reluctantly, she was sure) had gone—along Death's road.

Perhaps Leep knew another way. He knew most things. Still nibbling, she went along to his cave. He was squatting outside writing slowly and painfully upon a strip of bleached cloth. His thin figure was bent absorbedly over it.

"Go away," he said, without looking up. "Even my disciples are not allowed near me when I'm composing."

She sat down silently, watching him, and eating.

"Give me a loogo stalk, and you may stay."

She would have stayed, anyway, but she gave him a stalk.

"Your mother's dead," he said, with his mouth full.

She nodded, not questioning his source of knowledge. Leep was often aware of events without being told of them. He was a mystic, a seer, a versifier, and very lazy. He neither worked nor applied himself to the more honourable business of stealing. Because of his rare qualities, he had a circle of devotees who stole for him.

"You may have this," he said, passing her the cloth strip.

She took it and read it, as slowly and painfully as he'd written it.

*"It's all a pointless game,  
Played by a forgotten name;  
The warlord and child,  
Immortal, bored Senilde;  
In a house of tricks,  
A box of bricks;  
Beneath the verdant tower,  
Who commands the power  
To stifle his breath,  
And bring him death?"*

"Become my artist now, and I shall write you many such verses," he said.

She tucked the strip carefully in her one pocket. It was worth preserving. Cloth was scarce. This was good cloth. She could use it for patching.

She shook her head. "I wish to leave Fami. Which is the way?"

"There's only one way : to follow your mother."

She nodded silently.

"All ways lead to death," he said, sententiously. "Even the way of acceptance, of remaining here. All shall die soon, for shortly the glacier shall flow over Fami."

Again she nodded, and left him. As she walked back through the village of Fami, she looked around. This wide,

fertile ledge, with its caves, shacks, and vegetable patches, this odd fault on the margin of the great glacier, was the only world she or its inhabitants had ever known. According to the legends, their distant ancestors had fled up here in the mountains for refuge from the harsh, unending war sweeping the greater world.

But the war followed them. Machines flying in the clouds dropped fire and thunder on them, blowing great masses away from the mountainside. When the survivors dared to look, they found the path had been part of those rock-falls, and now all that was left on that side was an abrupt precipice. On the other side, a steep glacier swept down into gloom, putting out an arm to overhang the village. It was so steep and glassily hard that it was plain that if you went down it, you'd never be able to climb back again, even supposing you survived the descent. Above the ledge, away to the side of the glacial arm, the snowy slopes went as steeply up, up to the perpetual clouds. You could, with difficulty, gain the snow slopes, and climb them all the way to the clouds. But your reward would be certain death: for to breathe up in the clouds was fatal.

So when the survivors found good earth on the ledge, they decided to stay there and make the best of things. They built shacks from the material residue of their caravan, hollowed caves, tilled and sowed the earth, and called the place Fami which merely meant "Home." Most of the men were deserters from the Army, and they brought the Army code with them. They'd lived so long by looting that they'd come to accept it as the primary method of acquiring food and property—indeed, the only honourable one. To do it properly, especially among fellow soldiers, required all one's wits and ingenuity. If you were too stupid or weak or fearful to make a good thief, you had to labour to grow the food and make the utensils for living. To have to fall back on producing was a confession of failure, and carried a social stigma.

Mara was lucky, in one way. Her father had been in charge of Army provisions, knew all the tricks, and taught

her well. She had, in fact, surpassed him, never fumbled it once.

But he did get caught once, in the blackness of night at Filo's granary. The law was that if you caught a thief in the act of stealing you had every right to kill him. It was justice: bungling must be punished. It was the only way to keep the standard of performance high, worthy of the name of art—for a thief claimed the title of "artist."

So he was executed. His last words to Mara were: "Now my burden of duty falls on you. See that your mother never goes hungry—I charge you."

But mother was scarcely anything else but hungry. It was her natural state. Mara earned and gave her twice as much food as anyone else received, but she always wanted more. Mara began to suspect that her father had allowed himself to be caught on purpose.

So when in the evening the neighbours ceremoniously placed the naked (cloth was short in Fami) body of her mother on the edge of the glacier, and equally ceremoniously gave it a push, she was not sad when she saw it slide away and down, and become a fast-moving speck that the mist swallowed.

She went home and worked on the big, cloth-stuffed mattress she was fashioning from her spoils. (She was one of the reasons for cloth being scarce.) She finished it late in the night, and dragged it through the sleeping village to the glacier. She balanced it on the edge, lay on it, and pushed hard. She worked the ponderous thing away from the edge—then suddenly she was riding it at gathering speed down through the complete darkness.

Leep had advised her that the only way out was to follow her mother and she was doing it—literally. She was a simple girl, and something of a fatalist. What no other inhabitant of Fami had dared do even in daylight, she was doing casually at night, for no other reason than that was when her carrier was completed. She lay spreadeagled on the thing at an acute angle with the air rushing over her like an upward gale, with no idea of what lay even a yard ahead of her.

The swift glissading went on for a long time. She'd adjusted herself to it and was even beginning to doze, when the mattress started to slow with a series of jerks.

It stopped. She knelt on the mattress, groping around it with an exploratory hand. Her fingers dabbled in water in most directions. It was very cold. She got out her knife, split the mattress up the middle, and snuggled into the interior. Soon she was warm and asleep. The main object was accomplished: she had escaped from Fami. She could wait till first light to discover where she'd escaped to.

She awakened sometime after dawn and found her bed poised on a narrowing spit of hard snow. Several longer tongues of the glacier reached out into the shallows of the wide lake formed by its melting.

She found four shrunken but fairly well preserved bodies lying along the margin of the lake and recognised them as inhabitants of Fami who'd died in the last few years. Her mother was not among them, and she surmised that the greater weight of that body had carried it on into the lake. The bones of many of her ancestors and old acquaintances must lie around here, beneath the ice-snow or the water. Behind her the great ice slope mounted ever more steeply into the mist.

Beyond the smooth, leaden level of the lake were hills. She skirted the lake to reach them, passed through valleys which wound ever downwards until she emerged, towards evening, on a wide plain where the air was warm, almost oppressive. She slept there in a hollow. Next morning she ate the last of her loogo stalks, and set out across the plain.

She heard spasmodic rumblings and bangings in the far distance, and once the heavy drone of unseen aircraft passed over her head. But these were sounds one often heard from Fami. They'd never hurt anyone during her lifetime, and so she was not afraid of them.

She was not even afraid when she saw two strange birds fight briefly high in the sky and one fall dead to the ground. But she was curious when she saw a man floating down from

the heavens swinging beneath what looked like a big white sheet. The man might have some food with him—and that sheet looked like a nice piece of cloth. So she started walking to the spot where he'd come to earth.

Presently, she came upon the abandoned parachute, and was rapturous about the thin, smooth, incredibly clean silk. She gathered it together, tied it in a bundle with its own cords. She could see the man in the distance walking towards the broken body of the fallen bird. She balanced the bundle on her head and walked after him.

George delved in the wreckage of the helicopter. Everything seemed to be there except the automatic rifle, his sole weapon. It must have fallen out high up, and might now be anywhere within a radius of a couple of miles, and probably no longer in one piece.

He bit a chunk off a food bar, and laid the rest of it on the fuselage while he groped in the last corner of the splintered body to make sure of what he was already quite sure of : the rifle was gone. When he reached for the rest of the bar, that was gone too.

He looked on the ground, where it might have dropped, but it wasn't there. But a few yards away was his parachute, bundled up like a cushion. Sitting on it, watching him and eating the last of the bar, was a young girl with a solemn but beautiful pale face. She was wearing only a very tattered frock. Her limbs were bare, her hair jet black, her eyes brown and expressionless.

"Well, hello," he said, intensely surprised and equally interested.

She continued to sit and chew and watch him.

"Hungry?" he asked, and tossed her another food bar. She caught it neatly and eyed the box he'd taken it from.

In his turn, he inspected the first live Venusian any Earthling had seen. If they're all like this, he thought, it's going to be all right. She not only had a head, but a nice head; and

all her other members were not only in the right places, but most pleasingly arranged there.

He got out a couple of the Teleo outfits, and went into an elaborate miming routine to indicate what they were for and to assure her that the apparatus wouldn't harm her. He might as well have conserved his energy. She sat there finishing the second bar calmly, her gaze wandering from him back to the box. Indifferent, she let him adjust the cap over her raven hair.

With practice, this thought projection came as automatically as speech, and might therefore be described as speech.

"What's your name?" asked George.

"Mara," she said, without surprise.

"Where are you from, Mara?"

She waved sticky fingers in the general direction of the misty mountains, and then stuck the same fingers in her mouth and sucked them.

"I see. I'm George. I come from another planet, Earth."

Her response was negative. She became interested in the texture of the parachute.

"You may have that," George said, kindly.

"Naturally. It's mine."

"Finders keepers, eh? Look, Mara, what's this war all about? What side are you on—white circles or green triangles?"

She looked at him, as expressionless as ever, and not a thought came across. When she either didn't understand what he meant, or was disinterested, her mind seemed to go a complete blank.

"You don't understand? Circles. Triangles. Get it?"

She obviously didn't, so he hunted in the wreckage for something sharp enough to carve specimen circles and triangles in the turf. When he turned back, holding a pick, she was deep in the provision box helping herself to handfuls of the food bars.

"Hi, what's the game?" he said.

She stopped. "Game?" She pulled a piece of cloth from her pocket and tossed it to him. The unsightly marks on it conveyed nothing except that it was probably something in another language. He gave it back, telling her to read it.

She read the whole verse beginning : "*It's all a pointless game . . .*"

At the end, he switched off his transmitter for a while, did some private thinking, switched on again, took all the bars from her, and said : "Mara, these are strictly rationed. But I'll give you another if you'll tell me where you got this doggerel from, and what it's supposed to mean, and a little more general information about yourself and your people."

She said she didn't know what the verse meant any more than he did, but Leep was a man of strange perception and . . . She told him about Leep, and her mother, and Fami and its history, and the glacier and her escape. He gave her the promised bar and said : "It's a pity my helicopter's completely smashed. We could have flown up to Fami and interviewed your friend, Leep. He seems to know what it's all about."

"Oh, yes. He has made many cloth books of verses of this kind. They foretold many things which have come to pass."

"The village Nostradamus, eh? A useful guy to have around." He pondered, then said abruptly : "Well, it's the only lead. We'll call on him, using our flat feet."

"But the glacier is too slippery to climb."

He tapped the pick. "We'll cut steps. Come on. My time is limited."

He couldn't persuade her to leave the parachute. It was too precious a find. So he carried the provision box, the pick, spare Teleos, and his slung telescope, and was rather glad he'd not found the rifle after all. She walked sedately behind carrying the bundled 'chute on her head. They kept their Teleos on all the time.

The glacier was on altogether a greater scale than he'd imagined : wider, higher, steeper. This was the fifth day of painful step-cutting, inching up a slope that ran for miles.

Every night they had to hack out a niche in which to sleep, enfolded in the silken layers of the parachute. Even then he, in his thick air-suit, could scarce sleep for the cold.

He marvelled at the hardihood of Mara. Clad only in her thin frock, placing her bare feet unhesitatingly in the ice holes he'd chipped out, she climbed behind him without complaint or obvious fatigue. Nor did she question why she should retrace so tediously the route of her escape from Fami. There were no infantile regrets or crying for the moon in her make-up. She dealt only with facts. Her simple line of reasoning, George suspected, was : This man has food. He is a fool, and gives it away. Therefore, if I accompany him, I shall have food.

That night, as they lay in their small, artificial cave, he accused her directly : "Mara, you're not interested in the war, are you? You don't care if we find the white circle G.H.Q. or not?"

"No."

"And you don't want to return to Fami?"

"No."

"You only come with me because I feed you, and there is no food on the plain?"

"It is nice to be fed. I always had to feed others."

He sighed, and felt oddly regretful. He wished she had kept him company because she liked it. He'd grown to like having her around in this cold, dreary desolation. Somehow, she was better company even than the skipper, for she was uncomplicated, unfearful of the future, self-controlled. And, underneath, deep down, he'd found a queer little streak of quiet humour. Not the surface, facetious humour, the cover-up for uncertainty, but the real thing, seeing things for what they were, and smiling at them, unafraid.

Suddenly, she said : "Of course, if I wished, I could take the food whenever I wanted."

"No, Mara, not now. The box is locked and the key's in my pocket."

She made no answer, but presently shifted about as though

she'd difficulty in getting into a comfortable position for sleep. He lay there dozing lightly and wondering formlessly about the trio back at the space-ship. Had they suffered any more attacks or was the work on the fins going well? He'd been away almost a week now, and almost anything might have happened back there.

Again, how was he going to get back? If he contacted the white circle Venusians soon, they might provide some form of transport. If not, if he never found them, it was not going to be easy.

The automatic direction-recorder in the helicopter had been smashed to fragments in the crash. Therefore, he'd little notion of where the space-ship lay from here. All he knew was that somewhere out on the great plain there were mountain ranges other than this one, and the ship was somewhere way the other side of them. Even if he reached the general area, the ship, in its horizontal position, would not be easy to spot even through the telescope in the poor visibility—he might go wandering miles past it and become hopelessly lost.

And, at this rate, it might be several weeks before he could get back. By then, they may have given him up as lost or dead, and gone home, licking their wounds.

He started out of his sleepy reverie when a few loose objects fell within an inch or two of his nose. He investigated them gingerly. Half a dozen food bars.

He sat up, staring into the freezing darkness. Reaching out, he touched Mara's quiescent form. With the other hand he fumbled in his pocket: the key was still there.

"Yes?" she said, without moving.

"Did I leave the box unlocked?"

"No. I don't need keys. I have my own methods."

"Oh." He lay back. There was something wrong with his idea of Mara's reasoning. She could have helped herself to the food at any time, of course, and left him in the night. It would have been the most natural thing in the world for her, thieving being her profession. They'd argued about the ethics of hard labour as opposed to honest thieving. He'd

explained the social code of Earth, but she'd not been impressed by it. So they'd agreed to differ about that.

"Mara," he said, suddenly. "You could have stolen all the food and left me. Why didn't you?"

"Then I should have to carry it, and that box is heavy."

He was disappointed. "So that's all. It's not because you like me?"

"I like you."

"Why?"

"Because you don't want me to steal for you. Everyone I knew, except my father, thought the only point of my existence was to be their artist. You make no such demands on me. I like you."

"Um." It still wasn't quite satisfactory. He said: "I like you too, Mara. Goodnight." And turned over to go to sleep. But he couldn't sleep for a long while. He kept thinking about how he liked Mara.

In the morning they reached a point on a curve of the glacier from which they could see Fami. Or could have seen it had it been there to see. George, through his telescope, searched the area pointed out by Mara, and saw not a trace of the ledge. The outflanking arm of the glacier had swept over it and now hung, like a huge, torn, white lace curtain, for a thousand feet down the precipice.

"Leep said it would happen soon," said Mara, unperturbed.

"More fool he for staying there," said George, viciously. "Well, he and his rag-books will have to stay there for rather longer now—petrified for posterity. One small pick isn't going to shift *that* weight of ice. Even if we could get him out, he'd scarcely be in a condition for conversation. I guess the war's just got to remain a mystery."

He felt furious at the waste of time and effort, disheartened at the thought of the long, slow climb down the glacier again—to go where? Where was the white circle G.H.Q.?

While he wasted more time, in a clouded fury, glowering and kicking childishly at the side of an ice-step, Mara accepted and handled the situation in her calm, mature way. She'd

made a wide, flat cushion of the parachute. Now she seized the heavy provision box and shoved it off down the glacier. George grabbed at it, and missed. The thing went sliding with gathering momentum down the awful slope, then vanished with the speed of a bullet. He switched his anger to her.

"What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

She sat deliberately on the silken cushion, clinging to the step with one hand and patting the space beside her with the other, motioning him to join her. Then she smiled faintly and pointed after the box.

He got it, together with a tremor of apprehension. It hadn't crossed her mind to waste time in climbing down. She'd go the way she went before and she expected him to ride with her. His instinct was to dissuade her for both their sakes: the memory of the length of that run and its hazards was too fresh. But that fear was killed by the greater fear of her surprise and contempt. Carefully, he crawled to her side.

"Sure, let's go. I always had a yen to shoot Niagara."

They slid together, flat on their backs on the cushion, for a hundred yards, and then it felt as though they were no longer sliding, but falling. He glimpsed high ramparts on either side sawing rapidly, actively, at the grey clouds, while his stomach climbed up into his chest and the airflow chilled his cheeks. The swift, uncontrolled motion, combined with the utter silence, was terrifying. He clung equally fiercely to the material and to Mara, and shut both his eyes and his imagination, waiting for it to end.

After half a lifetime, it ended—abruptly. A wall of freezing cold water came tumbling down over his feet and buried him. He choked and sputtered and thrashed about completely without any sense of direction, and the water seemed to be poking icicles into his eyes, ears, and nose. Then, somehow, he found himself standing breast-deep in the lake, gasping like a landed fish.

Mara, neck-deep, was a few yards off, pushing her wet hair back. Her solemn face split suddenly in a grin when she

'saw him. He tried to speak and could do nothing but continue to gasp—the water was paralysingly cold. He beckoned her to follow, and floundered blindly to the shore. When he looked back, she was still out there, walking slowly around, seeming to feel about with her feet.

Then suddenly she did a little duck-dive and disappeared.

He waited over half a minute and she didn't reappear. Half-frightened, half-angry, he started sloshing out towards the spot. Then she bobbed up, yards nearer the shore, bending, and dragging something out of the shallows. It was the food-box. He went to help her.

"You c-cold-blooded little f-fish." His teeth were chattering.

She didn't understand. The Teleos had been washed off both of them. Luckily, the spares were in a waterproof satchel. But before she dried off, she wanted to go back and recover the parachute.

He stuck a Teleo on her and bawled: "Leave it there! The friction will have worn it full of holes, and anyway it's saturated—it'll weigh a ton now. I'll give you a new one when we reach the ship."

That made her so happy that her face became radiant. The wet frock clung to the curves of her form. A sudden hunger went through him. He caught hold of her, pressed her to him, kissed her roughly, almost brutally. She responded fiercely. Between kisses he babbled foolish promises. "You shall have the best Paris can offer . . . Dresses of silk and coats of fur . . . Jewels and such things as you have never dreamed of . . ."

She giggled like a child and caressed him like a woman.

The remains of her ancestors lay all around them, long past love, or memory, or the promises of life.

In the afternoon, they struck off in a new direction. Instead of returning down the valleys to the known emptiness of the plain, they toiled over the hills to the west, seeking a viewpoint. They found it on one crest, and for a moment they stood

hand in hand surveying the panorama. Then George's grip tightened. He pointed. Away down where rocks and cliffs abounded there was an isolated pinnacle. Unlike the others, vegetation of some kind clung to its almost perpendicular sides.

Under its height an apparently artificially levelled area lay, with the traces of a pattern showing through the heavy undergrowth. And there also was a long box of a house, dun brown, flat-roofed, many-windowed, with a beetling portico of disproportionate size.

"Beneath the verdant tower . . . The house of bricks, a box of tricks," said George, slowly, his memory only slightly faulty. He thought: Stumbling on it like this . . . This isn't real. It's out of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Then aloud: "Come on, Mara, let's follow the yellow brick road."

Naturally, the allusion meant nothing to her, but she didn't query it, only plunged gaily with him down the hill.

"This," said George, when they got to it, "was once a cultivated garden."

She said: "Yes," and let her gaze rove over the mould-encrusted stone seats, the weed-grown paths, the stagnant ornamental ponds, and the wilderness that was choking them all. At the far end the house stood as silent as the towering rock-pinnacle behind it. She saw now that the greenness of the latter was some sort of wide-leaved creeper swarming over it and doing its best to hide it, as though resentful of its eminence. But the house and its ridiculous portico was bare and free, as though it possessed a magic talisman against all green parasites.

George noticed that Mara was getting two steps ahead of him up the main drive to the house, and it wasn't because she'd quickened her pace. Ashamed of his hanging back, his caution at what enmity the house might contain, he hastened to catch up with her. They were nearing a big wrought-metal fountain. It was covered with verdigris, and

the surrounding basin, into which it had once played, was now an empty bowl, bone-dry.

He was amazed at the similarity of Terrestrial and Venusian ideas of landscape gardening. He thought: This could be Versailles after centuries of total neglect.

Then suddenly the fountain spurted a great wavering umbrella of dirty water well beyond the circumference of the basin, and soaked them through from head to foot before they could skip out of range.

George thought he heard a thin, high laugh from the direction of the house. He glowered as he wiped his face. He hated being made a fool of. Mara just giggled.

"There's a practical joker here somewhere," he growled. "When I've finished with him, he won't be so practical."

The water was sour and evil-smelling, which made it even less funny for him. His feet squelched in his shoes. There was a solid stone seat nearby. He sat down with the idea of taking his shoes off. The seat sank silently and smoothly into the earth and he was flat on his back with his feet in the air. This time he didn't know whether the distant laugh sounded or not, because Mara howled so loudly.

Red with mortification, violently angry, he jumped up, threw a withering glance at the convulsed Mara, and went striding purposefully towards the house. He'd find this joker and wring his neck.

The moss-grown drive was hard under his feet. And then, although its surface texture still looked exactly the same, it stopped being hard. It became soft, sticky, gooey, like molten rubber. He sank ankle-deep.

Grimly, he tried to plod through to the other indetectable side of this patch. But the stuff gripped and clung, and soon he was walking in slow motion, lifting one grotesquely enlarged blob of a foot after the other, with ridiculous care to keep his balance. Soon he realised the accumulation was getting so heavy that presently he'd not be capable of moving at all. So he abandoned the frontal assault, and floundered to the solid earth at one side of the drive. His dignity had been

sorely hurt, and at first he wouldn't look at Mara when she came up to him, wisely keeping to the verge. He tried to pull the stuff off his feet with his fingers and it stretched and stuck like chewed gum. He got into a terrible mess. The watcher at the house, invisible from here, was cackling continually. When Mara recovered from her own hilarity, she produced her knife and cut and scraped most of the mess off.

During this operation, her companion in mirth presented himself. He came from under the jutting portico, a short, broad figure in a monkish gown tied at his thick waist by a cord. He was red-cheeked, healthy-looking, seemed to be about fifty. His mouth was sensual and hung half open, giving him a vacant look that was enhanced by his queer, pale eyes, which seemed to comprehend only part of what they saw.

He looked harmless. He said something in a weak, cracked sort of a voice to George, who merely scowled at him. Mara answered him in his own language. They had quite a chat.

"Don't mind me," said George, getting the last of the stuff off.

Mara said: "It's Senilde."

"Oh," said George, and reflected. As he wanted information from Senilde, perhaps it wouldn't be politic to begin by screwing the guy's head off. With an effort he swallowed his gorge.

"Explain about the Teleo," he instructed Mara, while getting another outfit from the satchel.

"I have explained," she said, holding out her hand for it. She was still two steps ahead of him. He handed it over, fighting to stop another scowl from forming.

Through the new medium, Senilde said: "Once, long ago, I invented a gadget like this."

"Indeed?" said George. "What did you do with it?"

Senilde made a careless gesture. "Threw it away. I throw all my toys away in time. One gets bored . . . Still, I'm glad you came and let me play with my garden again. I haven't been able to find a victim for years. There's very

few people left on this planet, you know. Perhaps I overdid it."

"Overdid what?"

"The war. It's a game I used to play."

"Used to? It still seems to be in full swing."

"Oh, yes, it'll run on for a century or two, I suppose, until the last of the things have smashed themselves up. I got tired of them, and just let 'em run on. They're purely automatic, you know."

George said: "You mean, all those tanks and 'planes and things are entirely unmanned?"

"That's it."

George remembered the skipper basing his faith on his "white circle" allies. He remembered his own emotion when the wheeled H.Q. seemed to come to their rescue. He was annoyed to discover they'd both been fooling themselves. In some way it seemed unfair, an ironical let-down. He said, truculently: "Well, what the hell do you mean by letting them go on smashing up the planet?"

Senilde shrugged. "I don't mean anything. None of it means anything."

"It does to me. You nearly killed me and my friends—in fact, for all I know, my friends may have been killed by now. Can't you stop it?"

"Yes, if I want to."

"Then please stop it at once."

Senilde said, petulantly: "Why *should* I stop my game just because of you?"

George snatched Mara's knife. "Because I'll stick this through your gizzard if you don't."

"My dear fellow, I've often amused myself by sticking knives through my gizzard. I once stuck three through my heart. It doesn't have any effect—doesn't even tickle. I heal instantly. You can't kill me—I'm immortal, unfortunately."

"We'll see about that," said George, starting towards him with knife upraised.

Mara grabbed his arm, held him. "No, George. I don't believe in violence. We can always get what we want without trouble—I always have. Brutality is a poor substitute for wits."

Senilde looked at her with mild approval. "You're sensible as well as beautiful, girl. George (what a queer name!) —let me have your girl, and I'll switch off the war."

George let him have a hay-maker instead. It hit the solar plexus more by luck than judgment. Senilde rebounded a yard or so. His pale eyes lit up, and he smiled slobberingly. "Oh, a new game! What do you call it? What do I do now?"

George groaned.

Mara said: "Perhaps you'll show us over your house, Senilde. Have you any more tricks like the fountain?"

"Yes, lots of them. Such fun when I used to have visitors. Of course, I can't show you *all* of them. That would spoil it. I want you to discover some for yourselves—that's the best way to do it. You'll be so amused. Come on."

They followed him back to the house, George very carefully trying to tread in Senilde's footprints lest he tread in some other unsuspected gooey patch. This care didn't stop the doorstep from suddenly swinging down like a trap-door under his feet, precipitating him down a chute into blackness. There was more sticky stuff at the bottom. He sat there helpless in the dark, stuck like an insect on fly-paper.

He thought: There *must* be a way to kill that idiot!

Then he began to think of the skipper. Was he still alive? Was he wai'ing, wondering, hoping George would return soon with friendly Venusians, on their own intellectual level, eager to help? Probably. And here was the intrepid explorer falling and fooling about like a slapstick comedian, getting no place in a crazy Lewis Carroll world. Thank heavens the skipper couldn't see him now!

The lights went on. He was in a cellar, bare save for benches around the walls. Presumably they were for an invited

audience to sit on and howl at whichever unfortunate guest happened to fall into the trap. Senilde was there, with his foolish grin, and Mara, who, after one startled look, went into peals of laughter.

George said, grimly : "Mara, you disappoint me. I thought you had a real sense of humour. There's nothing remotely funny in this childish clowning. As for you, little fat man, why don't you be your age? How old are you, for heaven's sake?"

"Let me see—is it three or four thousand years? My memory isn't what it was. Venusian years, that is, of course—rather shorter than your own."

George said gruffly : "I don't believe a word of it. Get me out of here."

"Certainly." Senilde pressed a button and a liquid began bubbling out of little holes in the floor. It dissolved and melted away the sticky compound and set George free.

The whole house was like that. Door handles which either came off in your hand or stuck obstinately to it, or else gave you electric shocks. Stairways which, as you climbed them, abruptly changed into chutes so that you found yourself at the bottom again. If you picked up a book and opened it, it was liable to send a cloud of sneezing powder into your face.

There was one ingenious passage where the floor began to move under your feet in the opposite direction to which you were going and with equal speed. And it kept that perverse direction and pace whichever way you tried to go and however fast. You could run like mad, yet remain in the same place, never able to attain the end of the passage.

George went through the gamut with sullen patience, finding it rather more easy to bear when Mara also fell for some of these gags. What had got his goat before was being made the sole butt, being made to look ridiculous before Mara.

At last the tour was over. In all the great house, they'd seen

no other soul but themselves. They came now into a lounge furnished with Eastern luxuriousness: everything was deep and soft, the chairs, the carpet, the divans. It was many-coloured and cheerful because bright sunlight smote in through the windows and made the silks and satins glow.

"The sun—out at last?" said George, wonderingly, and went to the window. It was as though the window was glazed: he couldn't see the sky very clearly—it was just a flat whiteness with, in the centre, a very bright hazy disc, like the sun shining through high mist.

Senilde said, in his thin voice: "It's my own private sun. Quite a small thing, really, but it's perpetual and emits all the qualities of sunlight. You know, as I grow older I find I don't want to do much else but bask in here in the sunlight. Except for to-day, I've not been out of this room for many years. It's too dark and dull out there under the clouds. I often regret I cut the planet off from the sun like that. I've made it such a depressing place for myself."

"What do you mean, exactly?" asked George.

Mara sank into a divan, and a cushion squeaked under her like a great rat. Senilde giggled fatuously.

George gripped the man's shoulders and shook him. "Never mind the kid stuff, Senilde. Just what have you been getting up to on this planet? I want to take a full report back to Earth, and by heaven, I'll get it from you. You think I can't hurt you? I can. I can smash this place to pieces, burn it down. Where would you be then, without your playthings and your sunlight and your soft cushions, you old sybarite?"

One moment he was standing there shaking Senilde like a man emptying a sack. And then he was lying on his back on the carpet just opening his eyes and wondering where he was. Mara was lying a few feet from him, seemingly unconscious. Stiffly, he turned over and crawled to her. As he reached her, she sat up dazedly.

"Are you all right, Mara?"

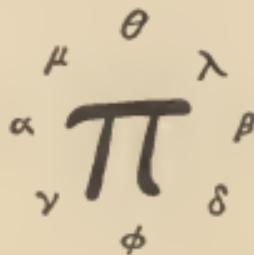
She nodded. "I thought he'd killed you. So I stabbed

him through the heart with my knife. I don't know what happened."

A knife dropped between them on the carpet. They looked up. Senilde stood over them. He'd closed his mouth and didn't look quite so foolish. He said: "There's your toy back, my dear. I told you that sort of thing was useless. So many people have tried it at one time or another that it became tiresome. I discourage them with a little thing I wear which creates an electrical field at a touch and stuns anyone who's much too near. Another good trick, eh?"

But they didn't laugh and this time nor did he.

He said: "Don't ever threaten me again, George (silly name!) Don't try to use violence on me or my possessions. It'll never work and you may kill yourself. Everything I have is protected. I'm a cautious man. Now make yourselves comfortable, and I'll tell you my history. You'd never have got away from here without having to listen to it, anyway. Every man needs an audience, and I've been without one for far too long . . ."



## CHAPTER FOUR

“NATURE makes many blunders,” Senilde said, “and one of them—I thought—is that a man should die. Simple cell creatures keep splitting in halves, and the halves in turn split, and so on. But the original portions still live. Any one of those creatures could truly be said to be potentially immortal. You can take a tissue of man or beast and keep it alive in a suitable culture.

“Single protoplasmic cells or small groups of them survive, but if they grow in a large, multi-celled body, like that of a man, that large group dies. What kills it? The different factor is—the size of the group. Once a group passes beyond a certain size, it seals its own doom.”

“Critical mass,” murmured George.

“You know about atomic energy?” said Senilde, mildly interested. “I suppose you would. Tell me, have you ever made any of those delightful atomic bombs?”

“Not personally,” said George.

“They were my favourite toy at one time. Such a spectacle! But one wearies even of that . . . My instruments tell me that they still go off in various parts of the planet sometimes—very infrequently, though I have a large stock somewhere—but I never bother nowadays to go out and look at them.”

“When was the last?” George asked.

"About twenty years ago, at a guess."

"H'm, that's roughly fourteen Terrestrial years . . . Takes us back to about 1985. Yes, there was a terrific atmospheric disturbance at one spot on Venus observed in that year. I guess that was it. There was another—photographed at Mount Wilson, back in June, 1927. And an even earlier one, in February, 1913."

"Indeed?" said Senilde, indifferently, and Mara said: "I don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you keep to the subject, which was immortality?"

"I find in these days a growing tendency of my mind to wander," said Senilde. "Where was I?"

They told him. He went on: "The reason, I found, was that the duration of life was directly linked to the permeability in that part of the living cell exposed to the radiations of the universe around it, and as growth—that is, accumulation—proceeds, so the inner cells suffer a natural and inevitable decrease in that permeability. They're entombed, choked, cut off from light, denied healthy contact with exterior radiation."

George said, thoughtfully: "Half a century or more ago, on Earth, a fellow named—er—Benedict—yes, H. M. Benedict—came to that conclusion after studying the senility of plants."

"Didn't he go on from there?"

"How could he?"

"I did. Nature made an error in the colloidal degree of protoplasm. I corrected it. Just a matter of the injection into the bloodstream of a perpetual solvent, which circulates, and thins out the too dense, too clinging proteins. The cells of your body are specialists. Either they travel a fixed, confined inner circuit in your bloodstream or else they're gummed immovably in place in your flesh and bones—except the white blood corpuscles. Fixity and specialisation spell death. My body-cells are free, fluid, adaptable, ameboid. When they feel the need to come to the surface, they do so. They move slowly—but they *move*. And they're versatile and continually

change their functions. I could make you immortal also, if I chose to. But I shan't. You're harmless, simple people. Why should I condemn you to the nightmare of boredom I endure?"

"Is it that bad?" said George, slowly.

"Young man, I've tried every kind of pleasure a million times—from the common pleasures of sensuality to the rarer ones of labour and asceticism; intellectual pleasures and bodily pleasures, the pleasures of lust and power and humility and martyrdom. And I have exhausted them. My palate has lost nearly all sensation. Repetition of a pleasure does not increase the pleasure: it makes it pall. Looking back, I see the happiest time of my life when I was a child, absorbed in play. I seek in my sad way to recover some of that pleasure in the childish devices you deprecate. You should not be angry with me, but sorry for me."

"I'm sorry for you," said Mara. George tried to feel sorry also, but somehow—no. Senilde had had everything. How could one feel sorry for him?

"Mara, you have a sweet nature, besides being sensible and beautiful," said Senilde. "You're something that was always pretty rare. I didn't like people much, you know. When you've lived among them for a few thousand years you've lost all your illusions about them. Beneath the layers of pretence, most people are small-hearted, incredibly selfish, dancing on the strings of self-interest."

He mused. "When I was a boy, I used to love playing with toy soldiers and staging little wars with them. When, at length, I became a bored immortal, I thought it would be fun to play those wars over again—with the live puppets. How easy it was to play on their fears, their vanities, their power-lusts! I had a grand time inventing new machines, new weapons and new methods of attack and defence for them, watching the little men applying them—in the name of this or that. First it was local wars, then national wars, then one great planetary civil war. You were looking for the

white circle headquarters, George. This is it. And I'm the commander."

"What about the green triangle H.Q.?"

"This is it also, and I its commander. They all used to come to me secretly, their generals, thinking I was running their side only. I used to laugh—they were so stiff, so serious and urgent with duty, so grateful for my guidance. Now I've forgotten even what their silly symbols were supposed to stand for—something noble and erroneous, of course."

He laughed now, his wet laugh.

"I'd put new powers in the hands of one side, and then the other—matching them evenly, tanks against tank-torpedoes, atomic bombs against bacteriological bombs. And then I grew tired of them and their petty, personal intrigues. They were always so jealous of each other, currying my favours. I was much more interested in the machines—at least they didn't fight against their own side. Anyway, human beings were becoming redundant in the war. I'd invented so many automatic weapons which could detect and recognise and engage their own targets that people were becoming just little nuisances hiding behind them, only sitting there and ducking and hoping they wouldn't be hurt. Merely in the way. When they didn't duck in time, they were liable to clog the machines with their messy bodies."

"That's no way to talk," said George, harshly.

Senilde ignored him. "So I decided to dispense with people altogether. I presented both sides with Meknitron gas, and they obligingly saturated the planet with it and wiped themselves out almost entirely. Odd spots escaped, like the village of Fami, where a perpetual up-draught kept the ledge clear. The mechanical war went on—still goes on—but I lost interest even in that, and now I'm content to bask here at home in my own sunlight until the real sunlight returns."

There was a short silence.

Then : "Do you expect me to feel sorry for you after that genecide?" said George, wrathfully.

Senilde shrugged. "Not really. You haven't lived long

enough to achieve detachment from the race. It takes at least a thousand years."

"Then, thanks, I can do without immortality."

"I wasn't thrusting it upon you. You've no need to worry."

Mara asked: "What do you mean 'about the sunlight returning'?"

"The clouds of Meknitron which completely covered the surface of Venus have been slowly losing substance all the time. Already they've lifted, and drift miles up in the air. They'll continue gradually to disperse, and perhaps in a thousand years or so the sun will break through again."

"I can hardly wait," said George sarcastically. "You may be interested to learn that your gas killed one of my fellow-travellers here."

"I'm not," said Senilde, with a yawn.

"What I'd like to know is what made those white circle tanks first treat us as enemies, and then suddenly switch to our side and defend us against the green triangles."

Senilde frowned. "Give me more details."

George gave him a brief sketch of the battle.

"I see," said Senilde. "Well, you may have noticed that the circle and triangle tanks and vehicles are of different designs and sizes. That was deliberate on my part. Each radar detecting apparatus is supplied with reference outlines of the vehicles or aircraft of its own side. If a tank, say, detects another coming, it traces the pattern of its outline and compares it with its file. If it corresponds to any on that file, the tank thinks—in the way that a mechanism 'thinks'—that the other is friendly. But if the outline is unfamiliar, the tank acts on the assumption that the other is an enemy."

"Well?"

"When your ship landed it was vertical. White circle tanks file no vertical shapes of that kind—so they opened fire. But the fire brought your ship down to the horizontal—where it so much resembled the white circle torpedo-on-wheels that it

passed muster as a friend. Similarly, the green triangle tanks registered it as an enemy. Now do you understand?"

"Yes. But the great steel wheels?"

"Oh, that's a weapon common to both sides, like guns. Clever notion of mine, don't you think? Dates back to the days of the humans—used to paralyse them with fear. Useful either for cutting them to pieces or pinning them down until they can be pulverised by artillery."

"You're a pleasant character, Senilde. If I were—" George broke off as another thought crossed his mind. "Look," he said, urgently, "my friends should soon be restoring our ship to the upright position, using the white circle tanks as haulers."

Senilde smiled. "Then they'll get a surprise. As soon as the tanks have done that job, they'll register the ship as an enemy again, and turn around and blast it to pieces."

"Then, for heaven's sake, stop sending power out to those infernal machines!"

"That," said Senilde, plaintively, "would mean my climbing to the top floor and messing about with switches and things. I hate climbing stairs. No, the effort's not worth it. That's my final answer."

George hissed with exasperation. "Then I'll go," he stormed. "Where is it?"

"You'll never find the control room—there's a secret panel or two and all kinds of safety devices. Besides, I don't want you prying—"

A bell rang sweetly high on the wall.

"Ah!" exclaimed Senilde. "This is my lucky day. We have another visitor. Who is it, I wonder? Let's see."

He walked out of the lounge. For a moment George and Mara stared at each other, and then George threw up his arms. "It's maddening to want to kill a man you can't kill. Where's the old fool going now?"

"The best way to find out," said Mara, practically, "is to follow him. I'd like to see who the visitor is, too."

She went out after Senilde, and George tagged along behind.

Senilde was standing in the gloomy cavern of the hall behind the portico staring out at the garden. In the distance a little figure was coming up the drive, approaching the big fountain. Senilde was already shaking with anticipatory glee.

George unslung his telescope and levelled it. The newcomer was a mere stick of a man, old, shrivelled, knock-kneed, in a one-piece tunic so dirty that its original colour was unplaceable. However, he seemed at ease, walking with slow calm. When the fountain performed, he walked steadily through the shower, not changing his pace, but only his expression, which became one of disgust.

Mara asked if she could look through the telescope, and George passed it to her.

"Why, it's Leep!" she exclaimed.

Senilde looked round and asked what instrument she was using. Either he'd never seen telescopes before or else they'd passed out of use on Venus so long ago that he'd quite forgotten them. George lent him it, and he was fascinated by it and watched every movement of Leep's with absorption. Leep didn't sit on any seats, and when he neared the sticky patch he seemed to divine its existence and location and walked carefully around it. Senilde sighed with disappointment. Then he whispered : "The step will catch him."

It didn't. Leep avoided the step, and came in through the side of the portico.

Mara greeted him in their own language. It came through the Teleo simply as "Hello, Leep."

Leep didn't seem much surprised either at her or their presence, and replied casually.

Mara said : "Oh, no, I've only just come. I've been back to have a look at Fami. How did you escape?"

George had dug out another Teleo outfit, and now he handed it to Leep. Mara explained its nature, and the seer put it on. Senilde watched Leep rather sulkily, his expression saying that this fellow promised poor sport.

Leep said : " I told everyone that the overhang was about to fall on the village, and they believed me, of course, and yet the fools hoped irrationally that somehow it wouldn't be so bad as I predicted. They'd become such creatures of habit that they couldn't bring themselves to leave Fami, and they talked themselves into staying. I didn't want to die, so I came down the glacier the way you did. And then I wandered about the foothills looking for this place. I knew it existed, but I was uncertain of its exact location. I could only divine it was somewhere this way—I've been looking for it for three days and I'm very hungry. Is there any food here?"

Senilde had lost interest in Leep, and was staring at distant prospects through the telescope.

So George said : " I've a little food, Leep. Come on in."

Senilde didn't demur. He was intent on playing with the new toy. He walked out into the garden with it, testing its power. The other three returned to the lounge, and George opened his provision box, and Leep ate food bars with relish.

" Why did you choose to come here?" asked George.

Leep said : " So far as I'm aware, it's the only habitation for many hundreds of miles. I thought Mara would have come here, and I wanted to find her."

" Why?" asked Mara.

He addressed her directly. " Because when my stupid disciples disappeared under the ice with the others, I had no one left to steal for me. You were the best artist in the village, Mara, and I hoped you'd now steal for me. Senilde must have plenty of food in this place somewhere."

" I suppose so, but we've never seen any of it," said Mara. " And why should I steal for you? Why don't you steal for yourself?"

" My talents are solely of the mind," said Leep, sadly. " I live only to think. My ideal existence is unending meditation. I'm quite impractical, as you know. I shall starve to death unless people find and give me food."

" What can you give in return?" asked George.

" The fruits of my knowledge. I was born with a gift for

knowing things, a kind of second sight. It is erratic, patchy. I can't command it. Odd items of information drift into my mind as I meditate, and they're often useful either to me or others. But I can only accept what is vouchsafed me. Sometimes it's only partial, like the location of this house, and no effort of mine will enlarge that knowledge."

"A sensitive, eh?" said George. "Your faculty isn't unknown to us Earthlings. We've detected it among our own kind, on our planet, and experimented with it—we call it extra-sensory perception, and, as you say, it isn't to be commanded."

"You come from another planet? I didn't even know that."

George rather liked the little old man, and told him about Earth, the journey here, and the subsequent happenings. He finished: "And as Mara and I are in love, I want to take her back to Earth with me. So you can't, I'm afraid, have her for your 'artist.' However, I suggest you come with us back to Earth. Real, live Venusians seem to be very rare specimens: you'd be a fine capture for me—but you'd be quite free, you understand. The Terrestrials would make much of you, honour you, listen to you, and certainly feed you."

"But would they leave me alone to meditate?"

"Eventually," said George, hesitantly.

"I see." The old man pondered. "There seems little choice. I must go where the food is. Being hungry is terrible, and spoils my concentration completely."

"Good," said George. "Now listen, Leep. Concealed somewhere in this house is a room containing the master switches controlling the power behind this idiotic war. See if you can divine where it is—"

He dropped his voice and broke off as Senilde came in. The fat man said, genially: "This telescope is a most intriguing toy, George. What can I trade you for it? Are you prepared to deal? Do you really need this girl? There must be others about the planet somewhere, and I could find you one—"

"Shut up!" said George, savagely.

Mara pinched him gently, and he glanced at her. Covertly, she went through the motion of turning a switch. He got it. He turned to Senilde and said, curtly: "Switch off the war and you can have the telescope."

"Is that all?" said Senilde, eagerly. "Oh, well, that can be done."

"I want to make sure it is done," said George. "My condition is that I see it done."

"Of course."

George rose from the couch. He was still holding a food bar. He proffered it to Senilde. "Here, I'll throw this in, too."

"What is it?"

"Food—good food."

Senilde waved it away. "I never eat. Haven't eaten for thousands of years. I've no need to. Bodily immortality alters one's metabolism entirely. I draw sufficient nourishment from my environment automatically, without that rather disgusting—if you'll forgive me—procedure."

Leep sat up, and his ears pricked up like an animal's. George tossed him the food bar, and remarked to Senilde: "You're a lucky man. Now let's go up all those awful stairs."

Mara joined them. George said: "Coming, Leep?"

"No, thank you," said the old man. "I feel I've got a thinking spell coming on. I'll just sit here."

There weren't many floors, but Senilde made heavy going of the stairs. However healthy his cells might be, centuries of lack of exercise had done nothing for his muscles or his wind. But he was right: George would never have found the room. That part of the house was like a Chinese puzzle box: sliding panels behind sliding panels, secret passages within secret passages, concealed springs which could only function after other concealed springs had been pressed.

The room itself was full of control panels; tiny lights winked everywhere, and an electric hum permeated it. Things like ticker tapes were clicking out printed messages, and rows of

spools revolved slowly and jerkily, winding them on. Senilde indicated them, grinning asininely. "All in different codes, and I can't remember one of them now. Once, I used to read them all."

"Do any of them give the location of our ship?" asked George.

"Several of them, no doubt, but how do I know which ones? I can't decipher a word."

George grunted, disappointed.

Senilde started snapping switches off. One by one at first, then in banks, the little lights went out. The message machines stopped. The hum faded slowly. Then all the apparatus was still, silent, dead.

"There you are," said Senilde, and George felt a great relief. The skipper, Sparks, and the mate should be safe now. And the ship would have to stay where it was until he got back to it—he couldn't, now, be left behind on Venus.

"Thank you," said George, and squeezed Mara's arm in gratitude for the result of her suggestion.

They came out through the maze of secret ways, which Senilde closed behind them. When they got down to the lounge again, Leep was still sitting there quietly.

George said: "Hello, had any inspirations?"

Leep looked at him thoughtfully. "Yes. I've been thinking of your ship, and suddenly the exact latitude and longitude of its position came to me."

George beamed. "Now we're getting somewhere. You're a smart fellow, Leep. Where is it?"

"The Teleo conveys an ambiguous meaning to that word 'smart,'" said Leep. "You're correct in the sense that I have a strong instinct for self-preservation."

"What do you mean? It's certainly in your interest to help us locate the ship so that you can come to Earth with us."

"I don't very much want to go to Earth now," said Leep. "If I go, you'll feed me, but I shall be continually harassed and importuned to use my gifts for others, to become a

common fortune-teller. I'm an old man and in the normal way shan't live much longer. I resent any limitation of my time for meditation. I've always resented the time wasted on the necessity for getting food. No, I'm quite willing to give up my place in the ship to Senilde here."

"To go to Earth?" said Senilde. "Why should I want to go to Earth?"

Leep dropped his gaze. He picked at the carpet. "You have exhausted every pleasure of Venus. You're bored sick. On Earth there must be multitudinous new pleasures which you've never tasted, never imagined, probably. And the Earthlings are very short-lived. With your wisdom, experience, authority, and permanent existence you couldn't help becoming their ruler very soon: it's inevitable that an immortal should rule mere mortals."

George's mouth had dropped open as wide as Senilde's. Then he glared, and said angrily: "Pipe down, Machiavelli. I'd got the wrong idea about you, you egocentric little twister. Who are you to dispense passages on our ship—not to mention the dictatorship of our planet? I take whom *I* choose—and it's no longer you."

Leep said softly: "You can't take anybody if you can't find the ship. I can tell you this: it's very far from here. It would take weeks to walk there, even if you walked in the right direction. If you didn't, it might take months, years, or eternity."

Mara said: "In return for letting us and Senilde find the ship and go to Earth, you want Senilde to give you the secret of immortality, don't you?"

"That's it, of course," said George.

"I don't deny it," said Leep. "I have set my heart on becoming an immortal. To meditate—for ever, without distraction! For such a prize, naturally, I would fight and bargain with all I possess or anyone else possesses."

"You bargain in vain," said Senilde. "I shall save you from yourself. Immortality is a curse. You would become as bored as I, and long for death, as often I have done."

"Such altruism," said Leep, sarcastically. "The truth is that you're jealous of your uniqueness, and you would fear a rival. Actually, you've nothing to fear from me. The only power I seek is over myself, over the labyrinths of my mind. The whole universe lies in a man's mind, as he'll discover if he contemplates that mind long enough. The trouble has always been that his life is too short."

"I've lived long enough," said Senilde, "and I've discovered nothing worth eternal life."

"I spoke of a *man's* mind," said Leep, scornfully. "Yours is the mind of an infant—it never became anything else. A clever, tinkering infant, with certain technical aptitudes. Emotionally, spiritually, morally, and intellectually you remained immature, with only one aim: pleasure. Crude, immediate pleasure. There's nothing in you of timeless serenity, the spirit of contemplation. No wonder you're bored. The boon of immortality is wasted on you. Let me have it. I know how to use it. You go to Earth and have your childish fun. They'll probably appreciate your surprise fountains and squeaking cushions there, and put you in the kindergarten where you belong."

Senilde's slack mouth had fallen more and more open during this abuse, and now he shut it tightly. Hatred gleamed in his pale eyes.

"The last thing I'd want to do is to perpetuate a mean and spiteful creature like you," he said. "As for going to Earth, I'd probably get more pleasure in just sitting here and watching you starve to death. I always liked the particular pleasure resident in sadism. No one's going to talk to me like that and expect to get away with it. You fear hunger and death more than anything. Right, then you can die of hunger. Slowly. And while we're waiting, just to show you how useless your bargaining counter is, we'll find the ship ourselves."

He turned away, beckoning George and Mara to follow him.

He led them into a wing of the house which they'd not previously visited. They followed him through a door and

found themselves in a great covered space like an airplane hangar. Almost filling it, looming up over them so that they had to crane their necks to see the top of it, was a tank even larger than the single green triangle one which had shelled the ship. But this one bore no gun or any distinguishing mark. Also, it was of different design, with a high turret crowned by a sort of railed look-out platform.

"I call this my war chariot," said Senilde. "I often used it to travel around in and observe the battles. Its outline is filed in both the circle and the triangle radar detectors, and so it's registered as a friend by both sides. But just in case of accidents or stray shells, it's very heavily armoured and it'll stand up to most things—except a wheeled torpedo. But I've never had any trouble in it, and usually I've remained aloft on the platform throughout the battles quite safely."

"You seem to have gone to a deal of trouble to safeguard your immortality," said George, dryly.

Senilde said seriously: "If a shell blew me apart, I might take a long time to grow together again."

George's imagination boggled at the vision. He wondered if Senilde were fooling himself or them. There must be limits to this immortality proposition.

Senilde did something George didn't see which caused the whole of the far wall to split and open in the form of two massive doors, revealing the grey Venusian landscape beyond.

"By the way," said Senilde, "we'll probably be out for some days. You'd better bring your food along."

When George returned with the provision box, the great tank was standing outside the doors, in the garden, its engine beating steadily, and Senilde and Mara were up on the look-out platform waiting for him. He clambered up the steel rungs to them, carrying the box awkwardly.

Mara asked: "Did you leave any food for Leep?"

"No," said George, tersely. "If we fail to find the ship on this trip, we may find on our return that hunger has softened Leep's obstinacy. In exchange for a couple of food bars, he may decide after all to divulge where the ship is."

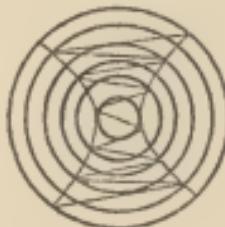
"Perhaps," said Mara. "But Leep isn't a weak character. He doesn't give in easily."

"Neither do I," said George.

Senilde was listening and idly fingering pointers on a dial. He said: "All we want from Leep are two numbers—those of the cross-lines to which to set these pointers. Then we'd only have to sit back, for the chariot would take us to the spot automatically. Couldn't we use the Teleo to extract them from his mind? I mean, if we all kept talking to him about the ship's position, the numbers are certain to cross his mind sooner or later, and we might pick up that thought—"

"He's not such a fool," said George. "He'd switch off his outfit the moment he saw what we were trying to do. He'd probably refuse to wear it at all."

"No, there's no chance that way," Mara agreed. "Leep has perfect mind control."




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## NEW CLUBS

Three of our readers are trying to start science fiction clubs in their areas. Other readers who are interested should contact them at the addresses given below:—

J. Darlington, Leeds Science Fiction Association, 31, Redhill Avenue, Glasshoughton, Castleford, Yorks. (Meetings at the Adelphi Hotel, Bridge End, Leeds 1.) D. Cowen, 58, Martin Road, Kettering, Northants. T. Davies, 118, Coney Hill Road, Gloucester. (This club will cover the area of Gloucester and Stroud.)

## CHAPTER FIVE

ALL that day, and the next, and for several more days after that, the huge tank rumbled about the land, quartering areas and searching methodically. But there was an awful lot of land. The poor visibility made it necessary to beat back and forth across wastes which, had the light been better, could have been seen at a glance to be bare. Senilde clung to his treasured telescope and never seemed to tire of observing with it.

They skirted great mountain ranges, forded wide, shallow rivers, zig-zagged and circled over endless plains. Sometimes they saw other tanks, and war machines of both sides, all static and silent. To the impatient George, their own tank moved with infuriating slowness.

Once he said to Senilde : "Haven't you something less ponderous—something faster and more manœuvrable? Say something like one of those rocket-propelled wheeled torpedoes?"

"No. The torpedoes are out of the question, on three counts. One, there's no cabin in them or carrying place for observation. Two, unlike this tank, they're not self-powered. To get one moving, I'd have to start the whole war going again, which would be dangerous for your friends. Three, it would be dangerous for us, too, because the torpedoes are legitimate targets for the green triangle tanks and bombers."

After a week of vain search, Senilde became bored and

insisted on returning to his house. They wanted to continue, but it wasn't their chariot, so they had to return with him.

Leep was still there, in the lounge, looking even thinner, and very pale. There were dark circles under his eyes: he'd not been able to sleep much because of his hunger pains. But he managed a faint smile when he saw them, and murmured: "Yes, it's very difficult when you've no idea where to look, isn't it?"

Nobody answered.

That night George slept using the provision box for a pillow. The box was locked, but he couldn't be sure that Leep, despite his protestations of his ineptitude as an "artist," wouldn't try to steal the key.

In the middle of the night, Mara crept to Leep's side with two handfuls of food bars. He stopped just long enough to say: "Thank you, child," before he seized them and devoured the lot. Afterwards, he sighed: "Oh, Mara, this cursed servitude of mind to food! Why weren't we designed to live on air, as Senilde does? Why did you steal for me, Mara?"

They were speaking softly in their own language, Teleos switched off.

"I'm a woman. I'm not hard, like a man. And I'm not ungrateful. In Fami, you often gave me good advice—for nothing. I cannot stand by and see you die like this. But why don't you try stealing for yourself, Leep? It's so easy."

"He was sleeping with his head on the box. It was impossible——"

"Nothing is impossible. I merely held up his head while I slid the box aside——"

"I haven't the touch for such feats . . . Mara, would you steal again for me?"

"I . . . don't know. There aren't many bars left, and George must not go hungry——"

"I don't mean food. While you've been away, I've been searching this house, both physically and with my mind. There's a room upstairs all of steel, and inside—I divine it—is a sealed bottle containing the fluid of immortality. Senilde

has preserved it ever since he first used it. One needs such a tiny dose to flower into an immortal! But the steel door is locked and barred. Also, it's ringed around with protective devices which would kill an unwary thief: falling knives that would behead one, stabbing, poisoned needles that spring from hidden sockets. I know where they are, but I don't know how to deal with them nor how to open the door. Such things were not unknown in Fami, and you are the best thief ever known. With my knowledge and your ability, we could procure that bottle. And then, immortal, we could defy Senilde."

She said: "I don't want to be immortal. And if I were not, Senilde would kill me when he discovered what I'd done."

"If we could cover our traces, that discovery is likely to be long delayed. You could escape meantime."

"Why should I run these risks for you? No."

"I didn't expect you to do it from charity. Remember, I have a bargaining counter. Do this for me and I shall give you the position of the space-ship. Then you and your Earthman can escape in Senilde's war chariot—it's his only conveyance: he can't overtake you. You can use it to go to the space-ship. Then you can fly to Earth with your man—Senilde can't reach you there."

"Maybe he can."

"No, Mara, you over-estimate him. His body may be immortal but his mind is nearing second childhood. It has all the signs of approaching senility—memory lapses, mind wandering, petulance, and so forth. People who never really grow out of their first childhood are always prone to early mental decay. In another few years Senilde will become a witless and vacant-minded fool, forgetting even his own identity, wandering aimlessly about, never able to die."

Mara shuddered. "Horrible!"

"But a fact. You were never afraid of facts . . . Well, Mara?"

"I'll think about it."

"Don't delay too long. I shall be a hungry man again

tomorrow. And, remember—*your* food won't last for ever. You must get to the ship to be saved from eventual starvation. Desperate situations call for desperate actions, Mara."

In the morning, in the garden, she took George aside. She confessed to her theft of the food, and George exploded.

"Why the hell did you give it to him? Don't you understand that the food is the one trump card we have to use against him? I know it's harsh, but we'll never get the ship's position from him in any other way."

"But we can," she said, and told him of Leep's proposition.

George frowned. "I hold no brief for Senilde, but after all, he has given us his admittedly queer hospitality, and he's helping us to find the ship. And his remarkable discovery is his property, not ours. Whereas, Leep is entirely selfish and calculating. He always seems to expect people to act like his disciples, doing everything for him while he sits and does nothing. He takes, but won't give. He refuses to come to Earth because it might inconvenience him—"

"He's not a wild animal to be caged and taken there as a specimen," she said. "His life is his own, not yours."

"Oh, so now you're taking *his* side. He's from the old home town, and I'm only a callous alien."

"Don't be silly, George."

"It's you who's silly. If we hold him off long enough, he'll come crawling to us and begging us to take him to Earth, where there's food."

"I've told you before, George, I've never liked the use of brutality as a means of getting what you want. You're no credit to your planet, and if they're all like you there, I'll change my mind about coming."

"Then you can stay here or go to hell!" he shouted.

It was their first real quarrel. They were glaring at each other when Senilde came from a path through the under-growth beside them.

"Certainly you can stay here, Mara, my dear," he said. "For ever, if you wish. As George doesn't want you now,

I'll make you an immortal to keep me company."

George rounded on him, snarling. "You stay out of this."

"You're rude and ungrateful, George. After all I've done to help and amuse you!"

George snorted. "Amuse me! Look, I want to go out and have another look for that ship. I'll go alone if you don't want to come."

"Why should I mind where you go?"

"I shall want to use the chariot, of course."

"Why 'of course'?" It's mine, not yours. You're too possessive."

"He certainly is," said Mara.

Senilde smiled at her, and said: "I'm glad we're seeing eye to eye at last, Mara. George, I'll make you a proposition. You may have the chariot for your own, as a gift, if—"

"If what?"

"If you'll give me Mara in return."

George made a noise of disgust. "She doesn't belong to me. Why ask me?"

Mara said: "I don't belong to anyone."

She turned her back on them both and walked quickly into the house. Senilde gave a cracked, high laugh. "She's not only sweet, sensible, and beautiful—she also has spirit."

George said, scornfully: "Still looking for new toys and games, eh?"

"A new toy, yes," said Senilde, softly, "but an old game."

George felt like hitting him again, but he remembered Senilde's protective stunner, and let his fist slowly uncoil. Mara was right in one thing: violence was small help when dealing with people like this. You had to be diplomatic. It was no good getting mad when you wanted favours from people. If he were to have another chance to search for the ship, he must try to restore the surface appearance of friendliness with Senilde. There's no bore like an old bore, he thought cheerlessly, and braced himself for the ordeal.

"Talking about games," he said, as casually as he could,

" this garden must be chock full of tricks like the fountain and the seat."

"Oh, it is," said Senilde, eagerly. "Let me show you them."

The affliction of silliness went on for over an hour, and at the end of it he got the hard-earned reward: permission to take the chariot out to scout for the rest of the day in a direction they'd not explored. "On two conditions," said Senilde. "You must return it by nightfall. You must not take Mara with you."

"I don't intend to take Mara," said George, stiffly.

"Good. I think I'll go and play with Leep for a bit. He was weakening fast last night, though he seems to have staged something of a rally this morning. But it won't last. I want to see him suffer. He'll never leave this place as long as he thinks he has a chance of getting my secret. By the time he realises he has no chance at all, he'll be too weak to move. I'm looking forward to that."

Captain Freiburg looked at the many long, joined cables spraying from near the ship's waist to their respective white circle tanks. There had been no more attacks, and the work on the fins had gone on at a spanking pace. It was finished well before his pessimistic estimate. Apart from the radio, the ship was as new. It needed now only pulling up on to its tail.

"Fine," he said. "I'm sure that'll do it. The angles are right. If only the cables hold . . ."

"I'm sure they will, sir," said the mate.

Sparks' lip was beginning to heal now, but his enforced taciturnity had become a habit and he made no comment.

The skipper scanned the grey sky and then the misty plain. Nothing stirred.

"Well, let's go," he said. "Remember—at five past noon exactly. On the dot."

Their watches had been synchronized to the second. Each man climbed into his tank, Freiburg taking the centre one. For a moment he sat there regarding the blank video screen and thought again of his set at home, the chair, the slippers . . .

Well, if this worked, he'd have a good chance of getting back to them. If it didn't, it looked as though they were sunk. Unless George returned with some help. Every day he had hoped to hear the buzz of the helicopter, George hastening back with good news. But there'd been no sound except that of their own hammering.

He reached out and turned the video switch. He waited, while the screen looked blankly back at him. Gradually his own face became as blank. Then he jiggled the switch. Nothing happened. He switched on the engine. Nothing happened.

He groaned, and swore. He flipped switches and levers about, and the response was nil. Everything was lifeless.

He stuck his head out of the turret and bawled to the others : "Are your tanks working?"

Their heads bobbed up almost together. "No, sir."

His heart sank. He was "Jonah" again. Wearily, he climbed out of the tank and lit a cigarette. He wondered how long the power had been shut off, and why it had been. The steel loops of the cables, which had taken so long to form, hung gracefully—and mockingly.

He told the other two with a hopefulness he didn't feel : "We'll have to keep trying at intervals. Maybe it'll come on again soon."

George, up on the observation platform of Senilde's chariot as it lumbered along, looked back at the dwindling bulk of that crazy great house and saw it slowly recede into the arms of the foot-hills and disappear. There was an ache in his heart he tried to deny. Why did love tremble on a razor's edge with a pit of hate on either side? Why, when you lost your balance, did the loved one and yourself so suddenly alter into quite different people? What alchemy could thus change one violent passion into its opposite in so short a time?

The real pain came with the slow change back. He saw the quarrel now as just a stupid projection of his own conflict. He wanted very much to find the skipper and the ship again. Because he thought Mara's machinations with Leep were

jeopardizing that chance, he rounded on her. All the more because he wanted her too. He feared to lose her, he feared to lose the chance of getting back to Earth, and these fears preyed on him and made him taut, resentful, ready to fly off the handle.

Now he regretted it. His love for Mara came growing back stronger than before. If he had to choose between Mara and the ship now, it would be Mara. Yet here he was, steadily driving away from Mara and towards (he hoped) the ship—so perverse a thing was pride.

However, he'd be back by nightfall. He'd have to. It was cunning of Senilde to keep Mara as a pledge for the return of his chariot. Senilde knew that he was still crazy about her. Yes, he'd return—even if he found the ship, he'd return. For her. He'd patch up this childish quarrel when he got back.

The house was quite gone now, and even the enfolding hills were fading in the mist. But still he looked back. The mighty engine of the tank throbbed under his feet and the rattling caterpillar tracks slid steadily around, carrying the monster blindly over the plain.

Nevertheless, he heard the creak of the stairway cover being lifted, and swung round to see Mara climb out of the body of the turret. Relief fought with his annoyance at being fooled, but when she smiled at him, his petty irritation dissolved on the instant. He caught hold of her and kissed her again and again, and ended the quarrel without a word.

When he allowed her to talk, she said: "The cross-line numbers are 593 and 871. Put them on the pointers."

He was very surprised, but he obeyed the injunction, regarding her with raised eyebrows. The tank immediately altered course twenty degrees. He'd been on the wrong track.

"So Leep told you, after all," he said.

"I stole the immortality fluid for him."

He smote his forehead.

She said, quickly: "It was the only thing to do. Why should Senilde so torture him? You don't understand Senilde. He's cruel and unscrupulous. He has tried several times to

take me from you. Because you have loyal qualities, you credit him with some. Leep can be selfish, yes, but Senilde is wholly so. If you took him to Earth, he would try to repeat there the pattern he made on Venus: a great war, with himself as war-lord, growing crazier every year."

"It's possible—even probable—you're right," he said. "You mustn't think I had any great trust in him. The thing was, I had to be careful. I'd thought more than once of you and I running away with this chariot, leaving him, while we sought for the ship ourselves. But there were two things to be considered. We might never have come across the ship, and as Leep was the only remaining hope, and he wouldn't leave the house, we had to stay there on good terms with the owner. The other thing is that directly Senilde discovered we'd stolen his chariot, he'd start the war going again, which, if my friends raise our ship, would spell their doom—and ours. We'd be condemned to this planet and starvation or Senilde's vengeance—which ever finished us first. And now I fear you've done exactly that to us. When Senilde finds what you've done——"

"He's not likely to find out about the theft for a long time, if ever. After I neutralised his safeguards to the steel room, I restored them exactly as they were. I took only a little of the fluid—it is colourless, so I replaced what I'd stolen with water and re-sealed the bottle. Why should he ever suspect?"

"That's not the point, Mara. I promised to be back at nightfall. If the ship is so far off that we cannot return by nightfall, he'll be put on inquiry right away. When he finds you're gone, too, he'll suspect we conspired to steal his chariot. Then the war will start again—just what I didn't want to happen."

"What about your bargain with him? He was to stop the war in return for your telescope."

"You're a funny girl, Mara. You've just said he's not to be trusted. Do you expect him to honour that agreement now? Anyhow, he *did* stop the war—but there was no mention of his never starting it again. And to complete the matter——"

He pointed to his telescope, which was still lying at the back of the ledge under the pointers, where Senilde had left it after the last trip.

"No, our only hope," he continued, "is that the ship isn't too far away. If we can reach it, mark its position, and return the chariot by nightfall, perhaps we can get away later somehow without trouble. Of if we can reach the ship by nightfall, we might yet escape in it before the trouble starts. If it takes us longer then things may not be pleasant."

He picked up the telescope and looked hopefully ahead. His free arm stole around Mara's waist.

Dusk crept over Senilde's garden, but in his lounge the artificial sun did not dim. Leep lay there basking in its light, feeling happier than at any time before in his life. To think and dream, to play endlessly within his mind, beyond harm, beyond distraction . . . He faced eternity with contentment.

The other immortal was not so content.

Senilde paced restlessly in and out. "Where has he got to?" he kept asking himself and Leep. But Leep merely smiled abstractedly and never answered. After all, he was supposed to be starving, conserving his strength.

"And where is Mara?" Senilde asked as often, and as often elicited no response.

Finally, when the starless, pitch-black Venusian night descended, he came in from the garden in a rage.

"They've run off in my chariot!" he wailed in a high, thin, complaining voice. "They've taken my telescope, too. Oh, I was a fool to let him have the chariot on any conditions. But not such a fool as he was to think he could get away with it. I'll bomb the country for miles around. I'll blow them and their space-ship to fragments."

He turned to go to the control room. With surprising agility, Leep sprang up and barred his way to the door.

"What's this?" said Senilde, suddenly becoming calm and cold.

"Leave them alone," said Leep, quietly.

Senilde looked at him freezingly for a moment, then reached out and touched him lightly on the chest. Leep looked slightly puzzled, but stood his ground. Senilde looked very much more puzzled. His electrical stunner should have laid Leep on his back, unconscious. It had never failed with any other mortal. Any other *mortal!* Had Leep, then, after all—?

Senilde flashed his hand down among the folds of his monkish gown. It came up gripping a small, flat pistol. He shot three radio-active needles into Leep's chest before the little man wrenched the gun from him.

Leep said: "Don't be such a silly child." And he did not fall, writhing, as he should have done.

Senilde glared at him, his weak, ugly mouth open, dribbling. He still had one advantage over Leep: bulk. He used it suddenly, shouldering Leep out of the way. The seer lost his balance, and fell. He was soon up, but Senilde had vanished.

Behind the wall, at the foot of the stairs, was a concealed elevator Senilde had thought it politic not to show George or Mara. He always liked to keep a few tricks up his sleeve.

When Leep reached the vicinity of the control room, knowing where it was, Senilde was already inside. Leep knew that, too. But he didn't know how to open the secret ways. He tried, but he never could understand mechanism of any kind. He was baffled.

Inside, the room stirred to life again. The hum rose till it became a near-shriek, the lights fluttered like a thousand winking eyes, the messages from the war machines and all the hidden observation posts came pouring in, yards of them, in the codes Senilde could no longer remember. It was provoking for him, because he knew that some of them must relate to the position not only of the space-ship but also of his runaway chariot.

He worked hard at the controls, organising the biggest all-out attack yet. It was a pity that the target area also was the biggest yet. If only he knew where they were . . .

## CHAPTER SIX

THE war chariot ploughed on through the night, its searchlights probing and lighting the way before it. It was cold up there on the platform, but they had to be there to see if they could see the ship ahead of them.

Down in the body of the tank was Senilde's cabin, wherein he slept on long journeys, after he'd set the chariot on its course. But they couldn't sleep now if they tried. How could they sleep, not knowing how near to their salvation they were, nor how far vengeance was riding behind them? Besides, if there were no look-out, they'd run the considerable risk of crashing headlong into the space-ship, crushing and killing.

There was another control panel in Senilde's cabin, complete with TV screen and radar detectors, but he'd not shown them how to manipulate it, and it was too late and too dangerous to start playing trial and error games now. It was safer to stick to known procedure.

"Listen," said George, suddenly. They listened. Gradually rising above the noise of the engine and the clanking treads came a deep booming hum.

"Planes!" George exclaimed. "The war's begun again."

The night sky was becoming a great sounding board now.

*Doo—oom, doo—oom, doo—oom*—the most menacing, soul-chilling sound George had ever heard. There must be something like a thousand planes up there. The throbbing growl vibrated down at them, grew even louder, seemed to be pulsating from all sides.

With thin shrieks which swelled to howls, the bombs began to fall.

Lulled into a sense of at least temporary security by the long peace, the three men had gone back to making the ship their living quarters.

But Captain Freiburg wasn't sleeping so well that night. The unexpected frustration of the plan to hoist the ship right way up had unsettled him, and the self-pity, which the days of hard labour and hope had dissolved, began to crystallise in him again. Why did fate always withhold from his ventures that final approving seal of luck?

Gradually, into his dismal private thoughts edged the distant drone of aircraft. But he wasn't really aware of it until the rumble of the bombing was superimposed on it.

He jumped up and made a tour of the port-holes. From almost every segment of the horizon he could see the clouds reflecting the jumping flashes like summer lightning. The raid was a long way off, but it meant that the war had started up again, and in a place like this you never knew what might suddenly hit you.

He roused the others and made them move back into their less comfortable beds in a shell crater. But none of them slept any more that night. The war remained distant, but it was more than an air raid now. They kept hearing the firing of artillery and the different, heavier sound of exploding shells.

And once they heard, also distant, the terrifying wail of one of the great steel wheels rushing unseen through the night.

Sparks shivered at the sound. "Lord," he said, "I hope no more of *those* come our way."

The mate crouched lower in his hole and said nothing.

The skipper said : " We'd better disconnect the cables in case our tanks start moving off into the battle, dragging the ship behind them. If only it were light and we could see what we were doing, I'd try to get the ship up before they got any such ideas."

They unhitched the cables, but the tanks never moved. The three men lay waiting for dawn.

George had made Mara go down into the shelter of the turret. He himself retreated partially into it, merely sticking his head up through the hole in the platform now and again to snatch glimpses ahead, lest there be any sign of the ship.

The night air was full of flying missiles, whole or in fragments, none deliberately aimed at them, so far as he could judge, but far too many of them coming dangerously near. Gun flashes danced about in the darkness like jumping squibs, and once he saw the glowing jet of a wheeled torpedo over-haul and pass the lumbering chariot like an express train. The shafts of their own headlights often showed tanks weaving about as thick as bugs in their path, but there were no collisions : the smaller tanks always skipped out of the giant's way in time.

They were protected from deliberate assault by the pattern of their tank, but they were open to accidental hits from blind shots. And now many of the tanks seemed to be firing blindly round the compass, and the bombing had reached a degree that could only be described as indiscriminate.

Through the apparatus of his control room, Senilde was lashing out wildly, not caring what was smashed so long as they were among the victims.

The tank jolted occasionally from glancing hits, which its tremendously thick armour withstood, and shell splinters hissed and pinged about its superstructure. But it trundled on steadily, and was still going when the dull Venusian dawn came filtering through the gloom.

With the dawn, and the war still somewhere over the

horizon, the Captain ventured out to test the three tanks. Yes, they were definitely back on the power beam.

He surveyed the smudgy length of the sky-line. The daylight robbed the explosive flashes of much of their strength and urgency. Perhaps the war would not come this way at all, or at least it might hold off for the morning.

And it should only be a morning's work to get the ship up.

He made his decision. "Sparks!" he called. "And you, Mister. Let's get these cables hitched on again."

They wasted no time, and presently the ship began slowly to rise as the three tanks tugged away in bottom gear.

It was daylight, and the chariot seemed to be leaving the war centre behind it. At least, in this direction there were few tanks, either white circle or green triangle, and there'd been no bombing for a couple of hours.

They were both up on the look-out platform again, peering ahead. But still the plain rolled on without a hint of the ship.

"Mara," said George, expressing a doubt that had been worrying him for some time, "do you think Leep might have bluffed you? Perhaps he didn't know the ship's position at all; perhaps he just pretended to so that he'd get what he wanted. A nice thing if these *are* fake figures, if we're heading straight for nowhere with Senilde out to kill us, while Leep sits back laughing—secure in his immortality."

"I've never known Leep to lie," she said, "but I couldn't say that he never would."

"He said he would fight for the prize of immortality with all he possessed," said George. "If that included—what's that noise? Listen—a high-pitched noise. Can you hear it?"

She listened. "Yes, but only just."

It was a thin, screeching note only just within the register of their hearing. George levelled his telescope, searching for the origin of the sound—it didn't appear to emanate from the chariot.

Soon it became visible, far to starboard. There was a squat machine, standing stationary on the plain. On the apex of an assembly of multitudinous gears it bore a revolving axle. Strung along the axle, and spinning with it at incredible speed, were four of the twenty-foot steel wheels.

Even as they watched, a forked metal arm reached up from the machine's interior and slowly edged one of the outer wheels off the end of the axle. It dropped a couple of feet to the ground, landing neatly on its edge, and darted off at rocket-speed. As the contact with earth began to slow it a little, the note of the whirling flutes slowly dropped. When the wheel became small and was disappearing far away, it had begun to howl. *Wheeeeeeee-eeeeee.*

"I told you about those things," said George. "Don't be afraid—they're only dangerous if you happen to be in their path, and these are going away from us. So that's the launching gear, eh? It looks fairly simple. Look, there goes another."

They were absorbed in watching the disc attack launched, and they didn't return their attention to their route until they'd seen the last dully-gleaming wheel drop and bowl swiftly off.

"Wish we could spare the time to wait and see how the apparatus gets its refills," said George, turning. "Good grief!"

He'd just seen, far ahead, a faint, dark stroke in the mist, the body of the space-ship. It seemed magically held (the cables were invisible to the naked eye at this distance) at an angle of seventy degrees to the ground.

He turned the telescope on it and saw the cables and the three straining tanks. Inch by inch, the ship was being pulled back on to its tail, approaching the perpendicular.

Senilde had told him that so long as the ship was out of the perpendicular, if only by a degree or two, it would still be safe. But the moment it became again exactly vertical, as it must do if the fins were correctly re-aligned (and the skipper wouldn't dream of raising the ship until they had

been), then things would click in all the detectors in range, and—

He bit his lip and thumped the platform rail with his fist till it hurt.

"How can I warn them?" he said, in agony. "How can I warn them?"

Mara said: "They must be able to see us. They'll stop."

But steadily the ship rose towards the fatal ninety degrees, pulled by its potential assassins. Seventy-five degrees, seventy-six, seventy-seven—

Even before, in the video, the skipper saw the great tank coming, the instruments in his tank had detected it with a little flutter of nervous movements. They had taken its measure. Was it friend or foe? He could see neither circle nor triangle on it. Nor did it appear to mount any armament.

Was this the vehicle of some neutral force? Some Venusian peace-makers?

Or was it a trick and a trap?

He hesitated. The space-ship was coming up fine, but he was scared that the cables might break at any moment. Their tensile strength must be strained to the full, he knew. If he stopped the operation now, let the ship just hang, the cables might go. And that wouldn't do the ship any good at all, from its present height.

Sparks and the mate were awaiting his orders, while continuing to obey his last. He decided to go on with it, as fast as they dared, try to get the ship standing, balanced and free, before the strange monster tank got here.

After all, if it were an enemy, surely the white circle tanks would have opened fire by now?

The ship continued to rise.

Seventy-nine degrees, eighty, eighty-one. Nearly there.

The war chariot had been going at top speed all the time, and George could do nothing to make it go faster.

He and Mara danced about on the platform, waving their arms, signalling frantically. Quite uselessly, as he knew. They were still too far away. If visible at all, they were specks.

They were losing the race against the degrees. It was futile to worry, fear, or hope. It was just a matter of relative speeds, of perspectives, of cold mathematics. All determined, and they couldn't change a thing. And by his calculation it was plain, graphically plain, that they'd come just too late.

Eighty-five degrees, eighty-six—— To the inexact human eye, the rocket-ship looked practically vertical now.

In a few moments, those innocent-seeming, friendly tanks grouped so closely about the ship would spring to life, turn and rend it. George might get there in time to use the great chariot to scatter them, bowl them over, but by then the worst would have happened.

One could straighten battered fins, but not repair the havoc a salvo of shells at point-blank range would inevitably cause to the ship. There was no escaping it. They were on the point of being marooned on foodless Venus, with the impregnable and almost omnipotent Senilde hunting them down . . .

The Captain glared briefly at the approaching monster, resenting its interruption at such a crucial period. Was that something moving on its roof? Two moving specks? People? Robots? No, surely just an illusion of the poor, hazy light.

If it were not, then whoever they were, they weren't going to stop him now. He'd failed too often, and he wasn't going to fail this time. He set his teeth and kept the tank straining forward.

Eighty-seven degrees, eighty-eight—— Only two to go now.

Came a thin wail, very high, rushing by, and then it was gone.

The skipper's tank jerked, and was dragged back a few feet. He slammed on the brakes as it stopped, cursed, and stuck his head out of the turret to investigate.

The towering space-ship had slewed round dangerously, dragging two of the tanks back with it. Now it hung awry, delicately poised, held only by his cable and Sparks' one. The mate's cable dangled loosely from the ship—it had parted very close to the mate's tank.

Of course, thought Freiburg, bitterly, it had to break *now*. Another ten seconds and it wouldn't have mattered.

The mate stuck his head out of his turret. He was white-faced, torn between apprehension of the great mysterious tank lumbering towards them and fear of what he knew had just missed him.

The skipper bawled irritably at him: "I thought you said they'd hold, Mister!"

The mate shook his head, disclaiming responsibility, and pointed dumbly at the ground beside his tank. And then, with a qualm, the skipper saw the brand-new, straight slice marking the path of a great steel wheel.

The launching apparatus had re-stocked in its mysterious way fast and efficiently, and acting on the signalled impulses from Senilde's control room, had volleyed its wheels in different directions. This had merely happened to be one of them.

The skipper knew nothing of that. He thought the wheel had been shot at them from the elephantine tank coming their way, which at once branded it definitely as an enemy.

He glared at the huge vehicle. Yes, there were certainly two people moving on the sort of control bridge surmounting it. They seemed to be dancing in triumph at their successful shot.

He felt he had to hit back somehow.

He hadn't really examined the gun of his own tank to see whether it could be manually operated. It was rather late to start now but he'd have a try. He lowered himself into the interior.

He found almost at once that the gun was fixed. To aim it, one had to aim the tank with it. In this case it would mean swinging the tank round some fifty degrees. That

would mean disturbing the now dangerous balance of the space-ship.

Well—did it matter?

It looked as if they were going to be cut or shot to pieces anyhow, if not crushed.

He didn't think his shells could stop the monster, but if he could blow that brace of skunks off the bridge he'd die, if not happy, then at least grimly satisfied. The only true failure, he told himself, is to pass out without hitting back.

He refocused the video to get the target clear. He could scarcely miss it now—he could blaze away over open sights.

Not taking his eye off his quarry, he gripped the lever that would swivel the tank. But he didn't pull it. He sat frozen, holding it. Surely, the gesticulating figure on the left was familiarly clothed . . . ?

Suddenly he leaped up, catching his shoulder an awful crack from a projecting corner. Not heeding it, he bobbed out of the turret and yelled across at the mate's unhitched tank: "Don't fire! It's George back! Don't fire!"

The clamour of the nearing war-chariot drowned it, but it didn't matter. It hadn't crossed the mate's mind to fire. He was curled up inside his tank like a baby in a womb, trying to feel safer that way.

There was a lot to explain and this really wasn't the time or place for explanations. A flight of bombers passed low over their heads and dropped their cargo about three miles away. Another steel wheel went screaming eagerly by, making for the bomb-smoke as if its victim were hiding from it there.

Freiburg had to take Mara largely on trust. She smiled very nicely at him and George said she was on their side, and he had to accept her advent for the moment.

"The main thing is," George told him rapidly, "that all these 'planes and war machines are out to get us. *All* of them—we have no friends. At the back of them is a madman

hunting us down. And he's getting things organised—but fast. We've got to get out of here—even faster."

"We're nearly there, and were nearer," said the skipper. "The ship was all but on its toes. Of all the stinking luck—if that cursed wheel hadn't cut that cable—"

"You'd have been dead now," said George. "That wheel was providence itself—the best bit of luck you ever had. I'll tell you why later. But first we've got to disconnect the antennæ from these tanks. Any moment now they may get the order from the crazy war-lord to move—remember, he's their master, not us. And if they move, they'll swing the ship off balance—it'll crash again."

"But if we immobilise the tanks, how shall we get the ship up again?" asked Sparks.

"The war-chariot," said George, jerking his thumb at it. "It and the space-ship are the only mechanical things around here that are independently powered. It's powerful enough to do a solo turn."

"Go to it!" snapped the skipper, and they all went to it, except Mara, who stood watching them inscrutably. George had tossed his hampering Teleo aside, and she hadn't understood a word of what had been said.

But presently, when the tanks had been made harmless, she helped the men fix cables from the war-chariot to the ship. That took nerve, because guns were starting to pop off from all quarters of the plain and the shells were crashing down haphazardly all about them.

Then, as they worked, the haphazard element gradually disappeared. The shells began to fall thickly in a planned barrage, and the barrage was creeping steadily across the plain towards them.

Simultaneously, waves of bombers were passing over them from the opposite direction, and they were no longer operating at random. They were pattern-bombing, laying explosive carpets over the plain methodically, acre by acre, and it was only a question of time—and not much of it—before the ship

and its party were reached by one or other of the travelling death areas.

At last the cables were fixed.

George straightened up and looked around. He pushed his hair back with a sweaty hand and grinned at the skipper.

"A nice spot to choose for a picnic," he said.

"Yes, but rather too many flies," grunted the skipper. "Now, George, get this damn contraption moving—keep her head *that* way. And not more than a yard at a time—mind that! I'll come up there with you."

George leapt smartly on to the ladder up the side of the chariot, and the skipper moved to follow him. At once Mara pushed him sharply out of the way, and followed on George's heels herself.

Freiburg recovered his balance. He opened his mouth to yell angrily after her, and then closed it again. Apart from being a waste of time, any mere human argument just now would be a piffling squeak compared with the great argument of the guns and bombers that were pounding the earth to dust all around them.

Nevertheless, he mounted close behind Mara implacably resolved that his directions would be obeyed, and he would throw her off the chariot if she interfered again. He was responsible for the safety of the space-ship and its crew, and he would stand for no one—least of all an alien and unknown girl—trying to change that.

On the bridge he gave his orders crisply and authoritatively, and George obeyed them, Mara at his side. It seemed that to be near George was all that Mara desired: she made no further attempt at interference.

And the space-ship came up vertically on its tail as easily as a bean-pole. The power residing in the engines of the great chariot seemed limitless. It was a pity to have to abandon such a machine without inspecting it, thought the skipper, but to hang around here a moment longer than was necessary was to invite a general and messy execution.

"Okay, that's it! Everybody get aboard the ship!" he bawled.

They all ran, George pushing Mara ahead of him.

Even when they were sealed in the ship, the racket outside seemed scarcely muffled. But then the vents began to roar, bellowing their defiant answer, and the ship rose slowly in a cloud of dust and smoke that was not all of its own making.

Up, up, up, gathering speed, and then suddenly into the grim and Meknitron cloud belt.

And then, all at once, like a leaping salmon, out of the murk into the sunlight.

Later, after a torrent of narrative from both parties, they were far enough out in space to see both the Earth and Venus as gleaming globes against the blackness of the void. The Earth was minute and distant, and looked like a tiny shining ball-bearing. But they were still very near to Venus, and it appeared as white and fluffy and innocuous as a ball of lamb's wool.

Mara was wrapped in the sheer wonder of seeing her planet as a globe. Nobody—not even Leep—had told her before that this was so.

"The planet of love!" said the skipper, and added something under his breath.

Suddenly, Mara exclaimed and pointed. But George and the skipper had noticed them at the same time: tiny black spots beginning to appear here and there to speckle that pure, dazzling cloud surface. The sullyng spots spread slowly.

They watched in silence, trying to visualise the immense catastrophes happening beneath those clouds, and what might have happened to them if they hadn't escaped.

Presently, George said: "Senilde's really getting into his stride now. He's managed to dig the atomic bombs out of storage. It must be sheer hell there. I'd like to come back sometime—but not too soon—just to see what those two immortals have contrived to do to the place and to themselves.

And find out which of them—if either—has come out on top. What do you think, Skip?"

"I think," said Captain Jonah Freiburg, deliberately, "that when I get back to my armchair and slippers, nothing on Earth—or on Venus—is going to persuade me to leave them again. Not ever. I've an idea you'll feel the same, George, when you're married."

"Perhaps," said George. "That's something we'll soon learn."

He drifted nearer to Mara and their arms interlocked. Venus dwindled slowly and presently they ceased to regard it.

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## THE END

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### NO ROCKETS

We had the great pleasure recently of attending the first informal meeting of the British Interplanetary Society. In the Saloon Bar of the "White Horse Tavern," Fetter Lane, London, the academic side of science fiction assembled to discuss the problems of space flight with no programme other than that of the licensing laws. A note of lightness was added by the almost simultaneous appearance of the *Punch* interplanetary number. The only complaint we have is that, though the meeting was held on the 5th November, there were no rockets to be seen!

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# Reviews

Once more we are devoting one of our valuable pages to notices of amateur magazines. This is because the ones we are reviewing here are exceptionally good and some of them are quite new. All of them are worth the price.

*Forerunner* is subtitled "Science Fiction and Fantasy Quarterly" and comes from Australia. The issue to hand contains the first part of a novel, a novelette, three short stories, a poem and an article. All very well written and well worth reading. *Forerunner* is a 79-page duplicated job with a printed insert and adult illustrations. It is said to be for private circulation only, but if you write to R. Douglas Nicholson, at 24 Warren Road, Double Bay, Sydney, Australia, he will probably put you on the list.

*The Journal of the Medway Science and Fantasy Club—A Neo Fanzine* is the somewhat cumbersome title of Anthony Thorne's new magazine, issued by the rapidly expanding fan population of the Gillingham and Medway area. The thing about this periodical that strikes us is its obvious sincerity and freedom from conceit—a characteristic of the club itself that others might well copy. Although it has only 14 pages and is not too well duplicated, this magazine contains some really good reading—and no small amount of adult fun. Tony's wife, Jeanne, contributes a very amusing account of "On Being an S.F. Widow!" The *Neozine* costs 9d. per copy from 21, Granville Road, Gillingham, Kent. But don't write;

go there and receive a very hearty welcome from this remarkable club, that has its own shop and supplies photos, models, lamps and a host of things that serious fans will want to possess.

*Space-Times* is published by the Nor'West S.F. Club every month and edited by Eric Bentcliffe at 47, Alldis Street, Great Moor, Stockport, Cheshire. A subscription of 5/- a year to the N.S.F.C. will bring *Space-Times* to you regularly. (If you don't know what the N.S.F.C. is, it is time you did. Write to Eric about it.)

The issue we have in hand seems to be written almost entirely by Eric Bentcliffe, but perhaps this is not a usual thing! At any rate, it is good reading, and the other contributors live up to the standard we demand in the fanzines we review. One of the contributors is Arthur C. Clarke!

*Space-Times* is a 14-page duplicated effort with very poor illustrations. The cover especially, while being well *printed*, was very badly drawn (sorry, Brian Lewis!).

To non-members of N.S.F.C., the magazine costs 6/- a year (\$1 in U.S.A.) for twelve issues.

The No. 3 issue of *Space-Diversions* came in recently and defies description. For a third issue, this magazine has a standard of production and content as good as any. It is going places. Three shillings a year from the Liverpool S.F. Society, 13a, St. Vincent Street, Liverpool, 3.

# projectiles

## LUCK

By sheer luck I came upon this No. 19 of *ASFm* in a bookshop here. For several hours our own trivial world was completely forgotten. This was just the right reading and additionally gave excellent training in English. You see, having first started, I could not lay the book away until I had read it through. I owe you many thanks for the good reading.

IVAR CHRISTENSEN,  
Grong St., Norway.

*Glad to hear from you, Ivar, and to know that you enjoyed Space Warp. Write again, please. By the way, your English is pretty good!*

## FAN CLUB?

Your query in No. 21 prompts me to drop you a line with information concerning fandom in South Africa. As far as I know there are no organised fan clubs out here, due to the fact that there are not enough fans to organise. I know of a score or so fans, though undoubtedly there are many more of whom I have not heard, but these do not appear to be very active. S.F. magazines are very rare in this country, *ASFm* being one of the very few that are in the shops. If you could find space to publish my address in a future issue, which, circulating widely in S.A., would possibly catch the eye of other fans, I would be glad to hear from them.

Miss PEARLE APPLEYARD,  
75, Kensington Drive,  
Durban North, Durban,  
Natal, South Africa.

*Are you listening, all you thousands who buy *ASFm* in South Africa? Shame on you! A great big country like yours with no science-fiction fan club! Time you got together, you know. Come on all of you, write to Pearle at once.*

## DOWN UNDER, TOO

The enclosed circular tells our story. We are particularly dependent on you, because *ASF* circulates widely out here. Best wishes to *Authentic's* continued upward climb.

R. D. NICHOLSON,  
24, Warren Road,  
Double Bay, Sydney,  
Australia.

*The circular, readers, refers to the Second Australian Science Fiction Convention, to be held over the first week-end in May, 1953. There will be a souvenir booklet with ad. spaces available to all who want them. Now then, Aussies, show us what you can do down there. Thanks for the best wishes, Mr. Nicholson (Ron? Robert? Ray?) and let's hear from you again.*

## STILL APPEARING

Reference your novels or short stories, please keep the long ones. As you say, the shorts are available elsewhere. I agree and they are nowhere near your high standard.

F. W. E. HOLLINGSWORTH,  
1, Standfield Gardens,  
Dagenham, Essex.

*Well now, Mr. Hollingsworth, there are many like you in that respect, and no doubt they are all rather sad at the inclusion of shorts*

## projectiles—continued

in *Authentic*. But, as we have pointed out in the editorial, all our former authors will still be appearing in the Panther book range—with longer stories at the same price. Look for them there.

### ANTICIPATION

I'd just like to let you know how much I look forward to your magazine. It gives me great pleasure. Many people say you have the best S.F. book in Britain, but I don't think you have quite passed the standard of some others.

GORDON BASS.

*Glad to know you like us, Gordon. Keep on reading—we'll surpass them all in time. And let us have your address next time you write.*

### COMPLAINT DOCTOR

Now for a word with the man who doctors the projectiles. Two or three of my friends have been lucky enough in having their letters published in your magazine, and although I admit that you do not write them yourselves, it is rather annoying to have a few adverse criticisms discreetly removed.

W. G. BROOKFIELD,  
Wayside, Southport Road,  
Scarisbrick, Lancs.

*Well, there you are, Mr. Brookfield, we have even done it with your letter. The point is firstly that we do not like printing several letters all of which waste valuable space by dealing with the same complaint (so we cross out those that have been repeated), and secondly that we will print only those complaints which we*

*think have any importance to readers in general, and to ourselves. But believe us, all complaints are carefully noted and counted to help in planning future issues.*

### CONSTANCY

I have been a reader of *ASFm* since it started and have kept every one of your issues. I can say from comparing them that there has been a constant improvement in both stories and covers. You are doing fine; keep it up.

T. DAVIES,  
Alandale,  
118, Coney Hill Road,  
Gloucester.

*Thank you for the compliments, Mr. Davies. We intend to go on climbing right up to the sky. If readers continue to give us their support, there's no telling what heights we shall reach together.*

### ENZEDDER

I would like you to know that your mag—well, *our* mag—is selling quite well here. I notice they don't stay long on the bookstalls. So you have Forrest Ackerman for your American correspondent. Good for you! I like his breezy way of writing. *Kia Ora!*

J. B. STACEY,  
12, Weka Street,  
Miramar, Wellington,  
New Zealand.

*It is a great pleasure to hear from you, Mr. Stacey, and to know that *Authentic* is getting around out there where so little other science fiction circulates. Do write again.*

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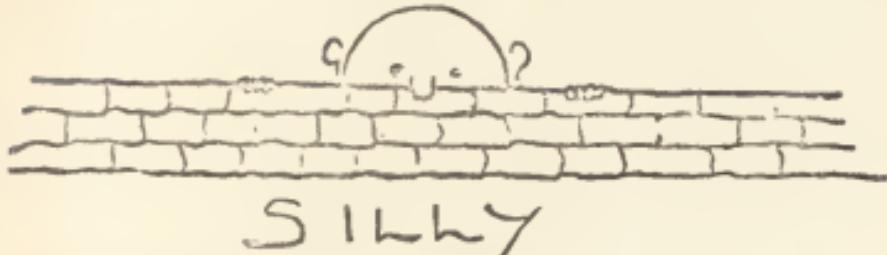
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**- HAMILTON -**

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"I received one of your Histories about three weeks ago and it has brought me luck. Before I received your book I was always without money, but now, thanks to you, I am never without money!" (Mrs.) G. O., Glos. 8.10.45."

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"... already after one fortnight we have had luck. I won... sum of £30... also have got a £1 per week increase in wages unexpected so Joan the Wad must be our lucky Star. So please send Jack O'Lantern to make the pair complete. (Mrs.) D. M., Kirkgate, Leeds. 19.11.45."

### LOST HIS JOAN—LOST HIS LUCK

"Please let me know how much to send for Joan the Wad and Jack O'Lantern. I had them both in 1931, but somehow lost them in hospital two years ago. I can honestly say that since losing them nothing has seemed to go right with me. I know what good luck Joan can bring by honest facts I have really experienced... I certainly know that Joan the Wad is more than a lucky charm. (Mr.) E. E. S., Liphook, Hants. 10.11.45."

### HOMELESS

LOOKED FOR A HOUSE FOR FOUR YEARS—Got Joan, Got a House, Got a Job as well.

"... Believe it or not, things have taken an astonishing change for the better since the day I received Joan—more than I have dared hope for before. I am being discharged from Services, 2nd. My family are homeless and I couldn't take a job. But now I have been offered a job in a cottage and good wages, one of my favourite jobs, tractor driving. Please note I have been after a house for just on four years. G. S., Army Fire Service, Slough. 10.10.45."

### MARRIED A MILLIONAIRE

"... two of my friends have won £500 each since receiving your mascots and another has married an American millionaire. ... Please forward me one Joan the Wad and one Jack O'Lantern. C. E., Levenshulme. 3.11.45."

### BETTER JOB, MORE MONEY, LESS HOURS, IMPROVED HEALTH

"My dear Joan... She has brought me continual good luck and her influence spreads to every sphere... I have got a much better job... greater wages... less working hours... and my health has greatly improved. I have always been a lonely kind of person, but... a friend of the opposite sex, she is also lonely... great opportunity for comradeship offered. So you see how the influence of Joan works. My pockets have always been full and I have had many wishes and desires fulfilled... I would not part with Joan for her weight in gold, she is much too valuable in every way. Her powers extend all over the world, and she works unceasingly for the full benefit of her friends and adherents. She rides in my pocket day and night and never leaves me. ... D. H., Leeds, 9. 2.11.45."

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